

Isaac Asimov TOO DEEP FOR ME

THE MAGAZINE OF
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MURDER ON LUPOZNY STATION

by Michael Bishop and
Gerald W. Page

Ian Watson

Susan C. Petrey

Robert F. Young



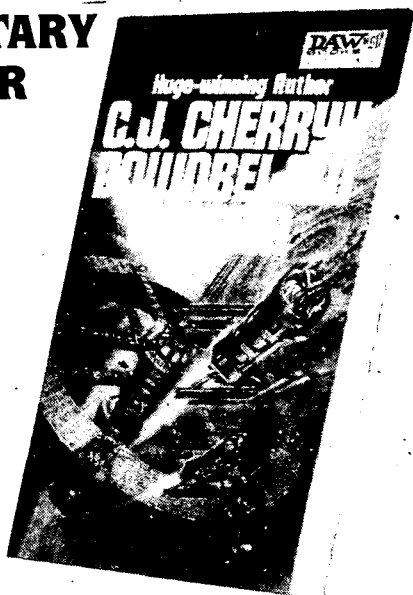
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Michael Bishop has contributed to F&SF since 1971, but this is his first story here since "Effigies" (October 1978). He and Gerald W. Page have fashioned a fascinating science fiction mystery tale, about a human/alien team who normally orchestrate faster-than-light travel and who are called on to investigate the murder of the Lupozny stationmaster.

Murder On Lupozny

BY

**MICHAEL BISHOP and
GERALD W. PAGE**

Alive, the man had undoubtedly intimidated his subordinates — a heavy-browed colossus of a stationmaster, with a muscular upper torso and hands like iron pincers. Now he lay face-down on the floor of his private quarters aboard Lupozny Station, light-years from the "civilized" worlds of the Ecumos Confederacy. The blood that had spilled across the floor from the wound near his heart put me in mind of cooling lava, for the emotional vulcanism that had powered Frederick Lupozny's life seemed far from extinguished. In falling and lurching forward, his second-in-command had discovered, the stationmaster had bent the haft of the knife that his unknown

assailant had plunged into him. His right hand, meanwhile, was still outstretched toward an object that lay only centimeters from his fingertips: a small, old-fashioned telescope.

Two hours ago, summoned from the aft astrogational room, Chaish Qu'chosh and I had set eyes on Lupozny Station for the first time. We had seen it from the positive-space conning module of the light-skater E.C.S. *Baidarka*, of which my tall alien dyadmate and I were then new crew members. This ship, under our guidance, had just emerged from the medium of faster-than-light travel that veteran skaters refer to as Black Ice; and there on our forward screens, glowing against the

Station

inky backdrop of normal space like so many incandescent coals and flinders, were the central cylinder, and the closely orbiting storage canisters of Lupozny Station.

Those canisters, Captain Ishmaela Sang told us, housed the nickel, iron, molybdenum, and various other ores dug by Lupozny's miners from the errant asteroids constituting the entire solar retinue of Anless 32, a small and lukewarm star. It was this ore which the *Baidarka* had come to pick up and to haul back to the Twin Ruby system and the factory world of Greater Bethlehem. But, by a coincidence which Captain Sang deplored, we had arrived at the station an hour or so after an un-

fortunate incident that would probably delay our enterprise.

"Someone over there has murdered the stationmaster," Captain Sang said, swiveling distractedly in her conning chair. "The facility's second-in-command, a man named Sinclair Toombs, wants an impartial party from the *Baidarka* to evaluate the matter. He thinks he's found the murderer, but until he has the support of a disinterested outsider or two, he's not going to rest easy. Ecumos is likely to view everyone over there as a suspect, and Toombs is anxious for the heat to be off. He wants you to begin."

"Us?" I said, looking warily to Chaish Qu'chosh.

"Why not, Mr. Detchemendy?" Captain Sang replied, ceasing to swivel. "Have you no faith in your powers? Chaish and you are an astrogational dyad, the *Baidarka's* skategrace."

"But this was our first actual —"

"No matter," Captain Sang interrupted me. "Your judgments, once shared and reconciled, give you an advantage over mere human and chode mortals. Or should." She smiled slyly. "Go over to Lupozny Station and help poor Toombs."

Chaish and I exchanged a glance. A dance of phosphenes—"stars," say human beings who see them after receiving a blow to the head — told me that Chaish Qu'chosh had triggered them in my brain and retinas by means of an electromagnetic emission similar to those used by electric eels as a sense sys-

tem. I nodded at Chaish, bowed to Captain Sang, and led my towering dyadmate out of the conning module to the *Baidarka's* spaceboat bay.

****Murder?*** Chaish signaled me. ****One of your kind has killed — taken the life of — another member of your species?***

Preoccupied, I didn't reply.

But let me explain: The chode purposely trigger phosphene patterns in one another's optical fields. These quasi-visual phenomena, in fact, constitute their "language," and their people have distinguished among forty-eight different naturally occurring or electromagnetically provokable categories of phosphene (more than three times the number originally detected by human researchers): quivering plaids, translucent snowflake characters, pinwheels, complicated moiré effects. For all of these the chode have either assigned specific meanings or deduced certain absolute innate meanings. In human circles, in fact, some say that their people are busily working out the secret code of the cosmos itself. Maybe. Maybe not. During our dyadship, Chaish never made any claim to Ultimate Knowledge, and it may have been my imagination that led me to suspect she was remorselessly on its trail

During the three Earth-standard years in which Chaish Qu'chosh and Raymond Detchemendy trained to be dyadmates, her human partner learned the complex symbology of the phos-

phenes she transmitted; she, in turn, learned the phonetic patterns of three different human languages. Her task was the more difficult. Chode from widely separated regions of their home world — which human beings call Voshlai, in the Suhail system — are instantly able to communicate, unless physiologically or emotionally powerless to trigger phosphenes in others, an extremely rare disability. The meanings of phosphene patterns are universal on Voshlai, and even the blind among the chode are able to see and interpret them — for their "language," although often stimulated from without, originates from within. Human beings, I should add, can see phosphenes by closing their eyes and vigorously but carefully rubbing their eyeballs.

"Chaish Qu'chosh," by the way is an arbitrary phonetic transliteration of the phosphene pattern by which my dyadmate invariably referred to herself. Assigning different sound values to the characters comprising her name, we could just as easily call her "Pob Ra' pib" or "Blej Lu' blaij."

In a matter of minutes our Ecumos spaceboat closed the distance between the *Baidarka* and Lupozny Station, which orbits Anless 32 almost at the outer edge of that star's feeble gravitational influence. The system's ore-bearing asteroids inscribe their crazy ellipses much closer in, darting like mercurial fish.

As Captain Sang had said, Chaish and I were a skategrace. We had just brought an interstellar vessel across Black Ice for the first time in our joint career, only to find that Frederick Lupozny's murder had upstaged our performance. No chance to celebrate our accomplishment. Of course, had we failed the *Baidarka* would have been frozen forever in The Ice.

A dyad skategrace is the soul of a faster-than-light vessel. Early on, when ships were first tentatively easing themselves out of positive space into the translight regions, their crews fell into a state of unconsciousness akin to death. Only ships whose contingents had a particularly quick-thinking captain or crew members less immediately susceptible to the siren song of The Ice were able to return. Therefore, interstellar travel took place at sublight speeds and "skating" remained an untested theoretical possibility — except, of course, by a few stalwart or addlepated captains who risked everything for a breakthrough.

Sheer serendipity came to the rescue. Aboard the freighter E.C.S. *Osprey*, nearly ninety years ago, were a human astrogator and a chode auxiliary pilot who had grown up together on Voshlai. They had been raised in the consciousness-sharing tenets of a sect called, by Ecumos demographers, Essencialism, a sect lightly regarded even by many of the chode, if regarded at all. No matter. On their fourth or fifth cruise, in a linkage as much phil-

osophical as physiological, the human astrogator and the chode pilot survived the *Osprey's* accidental side-slip into the wastes of Black Ice. Wholly awake, they exercised their complimentary talents not only to lift their ship free of danger but to skate across the gelid subtemporal blackness to their home world, Voshlai. In only two hours of feverish activity, they had guided the *Osprey* a distance of three light-years.

This unlikely pair, then, was the first dyad, and Ecumos took their serendipitous triumph to heart. Within a year training programs had been instituted on five different Confederacy worlds, including Voshlai itself, Earth, and Greater Bethlehem; within a decade the sublight mercantile and military vessels of the Confederacy had all become, with very little design or technological alteration, "light-skaters."

Chaish and I were one astrogational dyad out of five thousand, give or take a hundred or so. Nevertheless, considering a total E.C. population of better than one trillion, we were sufficiently uncommon that I viewed my partner and me as a splendid *rara avis*. I tremendously resented the fact that Frederick Lupozny had got himself murdered just in time to ruin our maiden run across The Ice: I was forty-four at the time, old for the human half of a skategrace; and because Chaish was approaching the chode equivalency of middle years, I was hungry for all the glory that our past lives had deferred.

Our spaceboat entered the hangar in the bay perpendicular to the cylinder of Lupozny Station, and we waited for the air pressure to equalize with that of the station itself. Although both Chaish and I were wearing suits, neither of us cared to exit into near vacuum. Fortunately, we didn't have to.

Have you touched the body since you found it?" I asked Sinclair Toombs, a lean, grey-eyed man of about my own age.

"Of course — to examine the wound. The knife is from Lupozny's desk. So is the telescope. Our stationmaster enjoyed surrounding himself with mementos from his career."

"The telescope?" I asked, nodding at it. "Does it function?"

"It's strictly for amateur stargazers," Toombs said, trying, without success, to look neither at Lupozny's corpse nor at Chaish Qu'chosh — who roamed the perimeters of the room like a prepossessing wraith of silver and gun-metal blue. "The captain whose skater first surveyed this system gave every crew member and passenger one of those scopes to remember their adventure by. Lupozny was aboard, and he brought that gadget with him when he and his partners began their operation here."

"How long ago was that?"

"About eleven years, standard reckoning."

I walked to Lupozny's feet and stared across his body and beyond. The discomfort of his living second-in-command was increasing, visibly. It seemed that the mining operation around Anless 32 was an exclusively human operation; contact with the chode was rare, and Toombs was reacting to my dyadmate's presence as if I had invited an impossible variety of dinosaur into his hermetic castle. Maybe, in a sense, I had. Sometimes I felt that, despite the occupational intimacy of our dyadship, I knew absolutely nothing about Chaish.

Toombs, however, was in sullen terror of her. His grey eyes shifted after her as she moved from Lupozny's bunk to the door of his tiny water closet to a rack of prefabricated shelving.

"What's over there?" I asked, pointing in the direction that Lupozny had fallen. All I could see beyond his outstretched right hand was a small, relatively dark corridor mouth.

"The lifeboat bays for this part of the station," Toombs answered, glad to have his attention directed away from the corpse and Chaish.

I looked back at the door by which we had entered Lupozny's quarters; there were no other entrances or exits. The station's control center, its hub, lay farther along the passage by which Toombs had directed us to the victim's room. After meeting us outside the spaceboat hangar (the station's principal airlock and primary means of access for off-board visitors), he had led

us down here without even offering to introduce us to the people in the control center. At first my suspicion was that he feared the reaction of his associates to Chaish. Although that worry may have contributed to Toombs' brusqueness, I now began to realize that he was desperate to have his own deductions confirmed and the case taken out of his hands.

"Is Lupozny's room serviced by maintenance crawlways?" I asked.

"I *know* who killed him," Toombs replied testily. "You're needlessly complicating things if you think —"

I cut him off by repeating my question.

"No, it's not, Mr. Detchemendy. There aren't any maintenance crawlways on Lupozny Station. It was constructed so that we could make most of our minor, day-to-day repairs from our living and working areas. We suit up and go outside to take care of many of our problems."

"Which brings me to the lifeboats. Have you checked them since Lupozny was killed?"

"As soon after we found him as we had the chance," Toombs said wearily. "Our lifeboats — our remora craft — are all fully pressurized. No one could have entered or exited the station through a lifeboat without leaving it evacuated. If someone *had* managed to open the exterior hatch of a remora, all of its air would have blown out into the void. That just didn't happen."

Suddenly I was seeing Toombs

through an ice storm of phosphenes: Chaish had encoded a question for me to put to him.

"Would your on-duty crew in the control center have seen anyone using the corridor connecting this room and the hub?"

"No question about it, Mr. Detchemendy."

"And undetected access through the only airlock at this end of the station — which would have permitted the murderer to sneak across the main passage into Lupozny's cabin — is an impossibility because the depressurization alarm would have alerted the crew. Is that another reasonable assumption, Mr. Toombs?"

"Ordinarily."

I didn't register the grudging note in this response because Chaish had seeded my field of vision with another secret blizzard: **There seems no way at all that anyone could have killed Lupozny and escaped detection,** she was declaring. In the way her message oscillated in and out of focus, I read both her bewilderment and her distaste for our enterprise.

I spoke aloud for Toombs' as well as her benefit: "We've got something of a locked-room murder on our hands. Except that our 'room' is a station in space."

"Damn it, Detchemendy, I've already told you that I know who killed Lupozny. The murderer's in custody, in fact. Don't complicate this for the sake of an imaginary challenge of your

own asinine invention!" The outburst seemed to restore a measure of Toombs' confidence. "Let's talk in a vacant office, near here. I'm tired of wading back and forth through Lupozny's blood."

Although nettled by his tone, I agreed. At the door, however, I realized that Chaish had made no move to follow us. Looking back, I saw that she was squatting beside the corpse, her intricately scaled torso bent at an angle that must have struck Toombs as either hysterical or predatory.

"Hey!" he shouted.

Chaish looked up at him, and he fell back — involuntarily — from her stare. Fascinated by the man's ill-concealed horror, I tried to see my dyad-mate as he saw her, as if for the first time.

Her eyes, which resembled large ball bearings, floated in a containing matter the color and consistency of mercury; they were slitted vertically by milky, diamond-shaped pupils like a poisonous snake's. On her head and upper body she appeared to be wearing iridescent mail, whose platelets flashed blue and silver. Closer scrutiny revealed that this mail was her skin: She was as naked as a newt. Her abdomen, buttocks, and upper thighs, meanwhile, were not scaled at all, but girded in a blue-grey integument like the scar tissue that forms on the backs of dark-coated animals whose fur has been stripped away by fire or boiling water. Her lower limbs were again clad in na-

tural mail, terminating in a pair of caloused, blue-grey feet.

I let my eyes sweep back to Chaish's head. It was shaped more like an extinct hominid's than a reptile's ... but for the bulge at the base of her brain stem. This hard but movable lump housed an evolutionary-directed extrusion of grey matter from the cerebral lobes above it. In front this bulge was mimicked by a loose, shimmering throat sac whose principal function among the chode seems to be as a sexual signal. And on both sides of Chaish's head, where a human being would have ears, were those horizontal strips of bright violet flesh that anatomists call "respiration ribbons."

No wonder Chaish had disrupted the already well-battered control of poor Sinclair Toombs.

"Get away from the body," he said, his voice quavering.

Chaish ignored him. She gripped Lupozny firmly by the shoulders and pulled him over to his back, revealing the bent haft of the knife. With her left hand (only four digits, but immense ones) she pulled the knife out. Then, letting the blade dangle between her two middle fingers, she rose and approached the door. Toombs pushed past me into the station's central corridor.

"**If they have a scanning electron microscope in their assay room,**" Chaish told me, "**they could check the haft for fingerprints.**"

I relayed this suggestion to

Toombs, who urged Chaish to go to the control center and to give the weapon to Synnova Helmuth, the station's assayer and metallurgist. Toombs shouted a series of instructions at the control center, telling Helmuth precisely what she must do with the knife. Helmuth came forward a few steps from the consoles up that way, and Chaish strolled nonchalantly toward her, bearing the bloody, out-sized bodkin.

"Neat," I told Toombs. "You get Chaish briefly out of the way and likewise ensure a thorough examination of the knife."

"He makes me nervous," Toombs confessed.

"She," I corrected him.

"Chode make me nervous. Irrational, maybe — but there it is. I've done nothing to be ashamed of, but that one — just the way she moved around Lupozny's room was an accusation."

I finally said what I had been thinking ever since Chaish had first looked down on the stationmaster's corpse: "They don't kill their own kind, Mr. Toombs. That ancient rumor is true: The chode don't take one another's lives."

Toombs gave me an incredulous moue. "Never?"

"Never," I echoed him. "Not for vengeance, or profit, or meanness, or mercy. Self-defense is never even an issue among them."

"Let's go in here," Toombs said, gesturing me into a nearby room and

bemusedly shaking his head.

The room into which Sinclair Toombs directed me was small, clean, and bleak. It contained a metal desk and three metal chairs, all bolted down against the unlikely prospect of a failure of the station's artificial-gravity generators.

"One of Lupozny's partners maintained an office here," Toombs said, sitting down behind the desk. "Back in the days when Lupozny had partners, that is. No one's used it is years."

I eased myself into one of the metal chairs. "How many unused rooms are there in this part of the station?"

"This is the only one. If you're trying to imply that someone might have hidden in here after killing Lupozny and then slipped out again, you're prospecting barren rock."

"Why?"

"We've accounted for the whereabouts of everyone aboard the station during the time that the murder had to occur. Besides, the people at the control center never saw anyone in this corridor."

"Who's your murderer, then?"

Toombs cocked his head to one side. "You may not believe this, but Lupozny himself told me."

"Lupozny?"

Toombs' lean face revolved toward me; his eyes, glittering, intercepted mine. "Let's just say that even toppling face-forward to his death, he was mean enough — just sufficiently cagey-

mean, Mr. Detchemendy — to want to pin his murder on the appropriate party. That's how and why he managed to leave us a clue."

"The telescope?"

The new stationmaster nodded.

"Just who does that point to, Mr. Toombs?"

"Listen: Here was the situation just before the *Baidarka* emerged from Black Ice. All but four of us were in the control center. We're working with minimal staffing because Lupozny could never stomach the expense of an adequate payroll. As for our mining crews, they're either out among The Rocks or manning the far-side fetch station."

"Which four weren't in the control center?"

"Not counting Lupozny, who'd given us instructions not to disturb him until the *Baidarka* arrived, only Misha Block, Corcoran Skolits, and me."

"Alibis?"

Toombs raised his right eyebrow. "I was in my office on the other side of the control center, sweating over the cargo-release forms you'll be taking with you when you leave."

"What about Misha Block and — ?" The other name had escaped me.

"Skolits. He's a journeyman asteroid miner, long in the company's employ. He came into the spaceboat hangar several hours ago with a partial load. His was the other craft you saw in there when you and your dyadmate arrived aboard the station."

"He didn't report immediately to the control center?"

"No. Just off the hangar, through a small accessway, is a recuperation facility for incoming miners. It's not unusual for them to shed their suits, shower, and settle in for a well-deserved rest. Skolits had been out prowling about nineteen hours. In any case, once aboard, we always knew where he was; he couldn't have been anywhere else."

"All right, That leaves this person Block."

"Misha's the station's astronomer and remora-craft controller." Toombs lofted this statement into the air like a target balloon.

"You think the telescope was Lupozny's way of fingering the station's astronomer — is that it?"

"That's the obvious interpretation, but there's more. You see —"

"Wait a minute. Before you slip the noose around Misha Block's neck, how did you discover that Lupozny was dead? You seem to enjoy springing the gallows trap even before you've produced a body."

Toombs stood up. "Listen, Detchemendy, you've *seen* the goddamn body!"

"Tell me how you found it."

Up and down at the pit of his stomach Toombs shook one of his gourd-like fists. "When the *Baidarka* broke through The Ice," he began angrily, "Hans Verschuur, our communications officer, tried to notify Lupozny of

your arrival. Lupozny didn't answer. So Verschuur got in touch with me, and I tried to summon the Station-master. Still no response." Toombs' oscillating fist continued to accent his story. "I went to the control center and found Skolits talking with Synnöva Helmuth about an ore sample he'd brought in."

"Skolits? I thought he was in the recuperation facility by the lifeboat hangar."

"He had been." Wilfully asserting control, Toombs halted his shaking fist. "He *had* been. But he'd come in from the lounge to check in formally and present a sample of his partial load. I asked him and Helmuth to go with me down the central corridor to Lupozny's quarters. The station-master's door was locked ... from the inside. I had to ask Loraine Block, our computer officer, to countermand the lock from her console in the hub. When Skolits, Helmuth, and I finally entered the room, we found Lupozny just as you've seen him."

"Loraine Block? This is your astronomer's wife; I take it. Misha and she have an old-fashioned marriage contract?" I was surprised. You found very few couples, either het or isoclinic, who did. Toombs sat down again. He turned toward the wall, giving me his hard, lupine face in profile. "Yes, an old-fashioned marriage contract," he said tonelessly. "That's important. Misha and Loraine aren't giddy adolescents; in fact, they're both in

their thirties. But"

"But what?"

"But they're genuinely, passionately in love with each other. In my experience that's a rare thing. And that's why Misha killed Frederick Lupozny."

"Because Misha loved his wife?"

"Because, Mr. Detchemendy, about a month ago —" Toombs turned toward me again, almost accusatively — "Lupozny escorted Loraine Block to his cabin, supposedly so that she could make a series of minor repairs to an auxiliary personnel computer. Once there, however, he took her."

"Took her?"

"Carnally. Against her will. But it happened behind closed doors, Loraine's word against Lupozny's, and the tension aboard this station has been close to unbearable ever since. Because Misha believed his wife — I do, too, for that matter — he made sure that the story of her violation reached everyone from his own point of view. Of late we've been especially jittery because three or four days ago Misha and Lupozny almost came to blows in the observatory."

I said nothing.

"Even in the best of times," Toombs went on, unbidden, "Lupozny had a way of keeping everybody pushed right to the edge. He was demanding, arbitrary, egotistical, insecure, physically intimidating. On the other hand, he could go weeks — or several days, anyway — exuding a low-key

sweetness that scared the living shit out of us. The hell of it is, Mr. Detchemendy, any one of us aboard this station could have killed that man. Misha Block just happened to be the one to do it. The rape of Loraine, and Misha's preoccupation with it even after Lupozny had apparently bought them both off with apologies and bonuses, finally pushed him over the edge."

I was growing more and more uncomfortable. For three years, back on Middlesaint in the Menkent system, my contacts with other human beings had been rare and meager in content. So cloistered had been our skategrace training, in fact, that Chaish and I had often gone three or four months without seeing anyone but our dyad mentor and a few other uncommunicative chode-and-human pairs in collateral skategrace programs. Now, it seemed, Sinclair Toombs was mercilessly reacquainting me with the unique and persistent follies of my kind.

"How does your station's crew abide it here?" I asked.

"Most of us are on one-year contracts. That gives us the sensation that our sufferings are finite. Besides, once you get on the payroll, the money isn't bad. Since there's nothing much to spend it for out here, it steadily accumulates for us on our home worlds."

"Do people ever choose to renew their contracts?"

"I'm on my second year. Not many of the station personnel work beyond their initial contracts, though. Miners

are more likely to opt for contract extensions, primarily because they don't have to put up with the abusive, demoralizing guff that Lupozny plied."

"How long have the Blocks been working here?"

"Seven months."

I tacked about: "Does Lupozny's death elevate you to his position in the company?"

"It elevates me to acting stationmaster," Toombs replied angrily, his right hand again tightening into a fist. "I'm an employee, Mr. Detchemendy, not a business partner or a shareholder. An *employee*!"

A veil of phosphene characters fell between Toombs and me, and I realized that Chaish had returned from the control center with Synnöva Helmut.

"**The knife haft reveals a number of Lupozny's own smeared fingerprints.**"

As my dyadmate and the station's assay officer entered the tiny room, I stood up. Toombs also stood, gamely struggling to demonstrate that Chaish's presence did not disturb him. He was folded as many ways as a paper finger puppet.

"Nothing else?" I asked, after nodding curtly at Helmut.

"**Perhaps the wear pattern of a glove. The assay officer probably has very little experience making such de-

terminations.**

I turned and told Toombs what Chaish had just said. He looked to Helmuth for confirmation, and she, somewhat bewilderedly, supplied it. They may have believed that Chaish had spoken with me telepathically, mind to mind, when the truth was in many ways stranger and more complex. Recovering, Toombs commenced a round of introductions, for Helmuth still did not know Chaish's name and recognized me only as the chode's anonymous human associate from the *Baidarka*. She was a trim, silver-blond woman with a generous nose and chaffinch-quick eyes.

"Glove markings on the knife haft?" Toombs asked her, motioning her to one of the bolted-down chairs. "Are you sure?"

"I've got to get back," she said, declining the invitation to sit. "No, I'm not sure — but the oily micropattern on the haft suggests that some kind of flexible material effaced some of Mr. Lupozny's old fingerprints and badly smeared several others. It *might* be the synthetic fabric of a spacesuit's glove that did that, but it's hard to be positive."

"As far as I'm concerned," Toombs said, looking at me, "that's corroborating evidence. It points directly to Misha Block." Synnöva Helmuth nodded deferentially at Chaish and me and disappeared with a sprightly step into the corridor. My dyadmate, meanwhile, stationed herself to the right of

Toombs' desk like a piece of painted statuary. Her mail shone almost blindingly in the cold, flat light.

"If Block's your murderer," I asked, "how did he get into and out of Lupozny's room undetected?"

"He had help," Toombs replied, glancing warily at Chaish. "Misha claims he was in the observatory developing some photographs, the sort we use to find and spectrographically evaluate asteroids. Really, though, he was putting on a vacuum suit and preparing to murder Frederick Lupozny. He let himself into the auxiliary airlock near the observatory, went out through it onto the station's hull, and walked forward to the auxiliary airlock just beyond Lupozny's room. From there it was a quick dash across a small section of corridor into the stationmaster's cabin. Block took his revenge on Lupozny and returned to the observatory the same way he had come." Toombs vibrated his right fist for emphasis. "Helmuth's electron-microscope scan of the knife haft supports this chain of reasoning. The murderer was wearing gloves, you see — the gloves from a spacesuit."

**What about the airlock alarms? ** Chaish asked. **Would not they have sounded? **

I put these questions to Toombs.

"Ordinarily, yes. But Misha and Loraine Block were acting in concert. When Misha first climbed onto the hull, Loraine intercepted the alarm trigger at her console in the hub,

through which almost every function of the station can be monitored — even locking and unlocking the doors of our people's private cabins. That's a capability upon which Lupozny had insisted when this station was built, not even exempting his own quarters. In any event, because Misha left both the observatory airlock and the airlock near Lupozny's room depressurized after exiting them, Loraine — again from the master console — activated the appropriate pumps to restore airlock pressurization. Those actions effectively covered her husband's tracks."

"Not if you managed to see through them," I countered, annoyed by Toombs' smug omniscience. "Where are Misha and Loraine Block now?"

"Under house arrest in their quarters, Misha for premeditated murder and Loraine for aiding and abetting him. If you come to agree with me, it's my hope you'll take the Blocks aboard the *Baidarka* for conveyance to the proper Ecumos authorities. I just want to be rid of the matter, Mr. Detchem-endy."

"**Would a murderer take himself into the territory of an intended victim without carrying a weapon?**" Chaish asked.

Rephrasing the query, I conveyed it to Toombs.

For a brief moment he looked taken aback. Then he said, "Everyone knew that Lupozny kept that knife on his desk. Misha has no discretion, no real

self-control — but he's very smart. Killing a man with his own weapon obviates the necessity of securing one of your own and then trying to dispose of it."

"You have it all figured out, don't you?"

Toombs turned away, showing me his haggard profile. "I'm sick of this business. I want it to be over."

"Let me talk to Loraine Block," I said.

The interview with Misha Block's "partner in crime" (if you accepted the new stationmaster's interpretation of events) took place in a room well away from the murder site; it gave off the main corridor beyond the hub of the station, not too far from the observatory.

In fact, it was Toombs' own office, a cubicle appointed with lime-green vinyl flooring, models of interstellar ships, baroque specimens of ore on wooden stands, and a gallery of holographic portraits, apparently of members of Toombs' family. The cargo-release forms on which he had been working several hours ago were still on his desk.

As for Lupozny, the dead man, a crew consisting of Chaish, Hans Verschuur, and me had helped Toombs remove his corpse to a cold coffin, in which we would transfer him to the *Baidarka*. Although death had pretty obviously resulted from the stabbing, our shipboard physicians would per-

form an autopsy to see if there were any incongruous foreign substances in his blood. We also intended to send over the contents of Lupozny's medicine cabinet for analysis. Considering the locked-room peculiarities attending his death, it wasn't altogether impossible that Lupozny had committed suicide and for eccentrically spiteful reasons of his own *disguised it as a murder*. Toombs dismissed this over-clever hypotheses out of hand, nor did I really seriously credit it—but Captain Sang had wanted her investigating dyad to put a skeptical T-square to every angle, and so the body, along with a box of harmless-looking medications and toilet articles, awaited shipment to the *Baidarka* in the bleak little room adjacent to the murder site.

Where the body had lain, bright green-yellow chalk marks outlined the man's attitude in death. Another vivid chalk loop showed where the telescope had fallen

Now Chaish and I were awaiting Loraine Block in a cluttered room almost at the other end of the station.

Soon Synnöva Helmuth escorted Loraine Block in to us, dropping her off in the same affectionate, distracted way a parent deposits a child at school. Helmuth, at least, did not regard Chaish and me as threats. That was comforting, for Toombs had been peevisly reluctant to let us interview Loraine Block in his absence. Finally I had asked him point-blank if he feared the outcome of such an interview, and

he had angrily acceded to our demand, knowing that he had no other choice.

Loraine Block seemed, at first glance, a beautiful child-woman. Small in stature, she wore her dark hair long, clasped at the nape in a butterfly barrette. Both Chaish and I towered over her, a fact to which she was wholly indifferent. More remarkable, she was unperturbed by the presence of a chode.

I pointed this petite computer officer to the swivel chair behind Toombs' desk, and when she sat, she ceased to convey the vulnerable daintiness of a child. I made brief introductions.

"I can answer your first question without your even having to ask it," she said. "Shall I do that?"

"Go ahead," I urged her.

"No, I definitely didn't intercept the airlock pressurization alarms at my computer console." She paused. "What's my prescience quota?"

"Did your husband kill Lupozny?"

Mildly piqued that I hadn't accepted her gambit, she again turned her attention to Chaish, who, partially concealed by a microfiche cabinet radiated satiny glints of silver and blue, her eyes like melting mirrors.

"You're a lovely representative of your people," Loraine Block told her. "Misha and I once had a brief stopover on your world — Voshlaj, that is; not a colony — when we were employed by the Ecumos freighter *Newfoundland* eight years ago." She looked back at me. "No, Misha didn't kill our sta-

tionmaster. My husband was in the observatory when the murder apparently occurred. He *might* have killed Lupozny, given half a chance — but that chance never presented itself, and after he got into a stupid scuffle with Lupozny a few days ago, I warned him that he was jeopardizing everything we've worked for out here."

"Which is what?"

"The chance to visit as many different inhabited solar systems as we can. That's always been our life's goal together."

I stared intently at the demoralizing lime-green floor. "Lupozny raped you?"

"Yes."

"Did you hate him?"

"Despised him. But I had despised him *before* he raped me, Mr. Detchendy. After it happened, I " Her voice trailed off.

"You told Misha."

She ignored this. "He used his size to overpower me. It was as if he were manipulating a doll. I think he would have derived as much joy from his own clenched fist. It certainly wasn't an erotic impulse that prompted his assault."

"What, then? A desire to humiliate?" I looked up.

"Partially," she replied. "A more compelling motive, though, was his need to reaffirm his authority over everyone aboard this station. I think his real target was Sinclair Toombs."

"Raping you was a slap at Sinclair Toombs?" Behind Loraine Block, the

new stationmaster's family smiled down on Chaish and me from the hologramic gallery on the wall: a woman, two children, and a set of gracefully aging parents or in-laws.

"I think it was. Mr. Toombs — with admirable discretion — has invited me to bed with him on three or four different occasions. Unlike Lupozny, he was — maybe he still is — truly taken with me. Or maybe he just envied my relationship with Misha and hoped to share in it in some silly, even harmless way — by making love to me. In any case, Lupozny picked up on his longing. And Toombs irritated Lupozny with his efficiency, his ability to stay on top of matters that had slipped Lupozny's own notice. Because Lupozny's sexual wiring was basically isoclinic — same-to-same, you understand — I think he raped me as a complicated sort of rebuke to Toombs. Any humiliation to me was incidental."

"If Lupozny picked up on Toombs' longing, what about Misha? Did he?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

"He's absorbed in either me or his astronomy, not much else. And Toombs, as I said, was always discreet."

"How did Toombs behave when you refused him?"

"How is anybody supposed to behave when unequivocally rejected? I don't think he *liked* it. He usually just smiled. He certainly didn't shout or throw things."

"Do you think he's trying to frame you and Misha?"

"It's a definite possibility, isn't it?" Loraine Block smiled.

"**Why?" Chaish suddenly asked. I turned to her. "Toombs may be attempting to punish Loraine for refusing him."

"**Why does he also seek to punish Misha?"

"Out of envy," I hazarded. "None of this is certain, Chaish. We're exploring the possibilities."

Even though I anticipated another brief flurry of phosphenes, Chaish simply stared at me.

"I know how you two communicate," Loraine Block suddenly said. "Crystals of inner light. Your companion generates them out of your own brain and optical equipment. Misha and I tried to acquaint ourselves with the phenomenon when we were on Voshlai. We attended a mechanical simulation — projections on a wall — in a visitor's temple outside a northern lake city. But I've never seen the real thing."

"You'd like to?"

"Very much — if it's possible."

Chaish, understanding, glided forward and squatted purposefully before Loraine Block. The transmission of phosphene images requires that the chode have a mental fix on the retinas of any potential communicant, as well as some small handle on her frame of mind. Chaish was attempting to secure these things, probing to locate Loraine's

foveae in order to transmit an electromagnetic signal into their sensitive depressions and so from there to the young woman's brain. The rebounding of this signal along the foveal tracks would, in turn, create the "crystals of inner light" which Loraine wanted to see. Later, more familiar with her subject, Chaish would be able to beam this encoded signal straight to the visual cortex.

A moment later Loraine Block had seen her gentle explosion of phosphenes. She blinked and put the heels of her hands to her eyes. Chaish returned to her corner.

"Lovely." The computer officer lowered her hands. "Just lovely."

I watched the beatific expression on Loraine Block's face dissolve into one of bewilderment. She turned to me.

"But it's all abstract patterns and floating lacework. Are you really able to interpret it?"

"Sure — but there's three years of sweat, hypnopaedia, and mental anguish in that accomplishment."

Lifting her chin, she looked to Chaish. "Please tell Mr. Detchemendy what you've just told me. Please. So that he can translate it for me."

After Chaish had regaled me with the same message, I relayed it — in English — to Loraine: "I wish for you and Misha all anticipated fulfillment of your life's plan, that and a great deal more." Then I said, "Tell me who was in the control room with you when you were supposedly intercepting air-

lock alarms for your husband."

"Hans Verschuur," she responded readily enough. "And Daphne Kaunas, the life-systems officer. Synnöva was there, too, of course. And Corcoran Skolits, the pilot of a mining boat, was talking with Synnöva about something he'd found during his work shift among The Rocks. They're pretty good friends, those two."

"Was Skolits there the entire time?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'entire time' — he came into the control center about twenty minutes before the *Baidarka* arrived. All hell broke loose when Hans was unable to rouse Lupozny."

"From which direction did Skolits enter the control center?"

"The only way he could — from the access corridor to the spaceboat hangar, the same way you and Chaish did."

"There was no way he could slip down to Lupozny's quarters without being seen by the personnel in the hub?"

"Everyone saw you, didn't they?"

"Just long enough to nod or wave. Toombs hustled us down there before we could even say hello."

"But you were seen?"

"Yes," I admitted. "Everyone gawked."

Loraine Block absentmindedly examined one of Sinclair Toombs' light-skater models, then blinked and said, "I don't know who killed Frederick Lupozny. It's hard for me to see how any

of us could have done it. What I do know is this: I intercepted no airlock alarms, and Misha didn't kill the bastard. That's my story."

"Tell me about Corcoran Skolits."

"I don't know anything about Corcoran Skolits." Loraine Block shrugged dismissively. "Only that he's in and out of the station at odd intervals and that he's an old hand out here."

"Anything else?" I waited, expecting nothing.

"Oh, yes," Loraine Block said with a small surge of enthusiasm. "Oddly enough, Skolits is something of a pocket expert on the chode. It's his pet avocation. I once overheard him tell Synnöva that as a boy he had hoped to be the human half of a skategrace."

Chaish, noncommittal, sent me no excited or disbelieving snowfalls. Her calm was almost admonitory.

When Toombs returned to his office, I told him that I wanted to talk with Corcoran Skolits. This request plainly annoyed him. He heaved himself into his swivel chair and banged his right hand down on its padded arm.

"Talk to Misha Block instead."

"I've just talked to his wife. She said she intercepted no alarms and that your frustrated longings have disposed you to be vindictive."

Toombs continued to exercise a precarious control over his emotions. "The longings I freely acknowledge.

The vindictiveness I don't. Everything points to the Blocks. Even if Loraine is ordinarily the most forthright of women, she would lie for Misha. She'd do virtually anything for him."

"Including refusing the advances of a man who wasn't her husband?"

"Talk to Misha Block, damn it! If you're such a magician at distinguishing between our illusions and our squalid realities, he'll topple to your magic touch in a goddamn nanosecond!"

"I'd rather talk to Corcoran Skolits."

"Why?" Toombs blurted, profoundly exasperated.

"**It would be better not to tell him,**" Chaish cautioned me.

Heeding this advice, I met Toombs' question with one of my own: "Isn't it true that even if Loraine Block intercepted the airlock alarms, the actual functioning of the airlocks would have registered in the memory circuits of the computer?"

"It would have, certainly — but Loraine, in turn, is smart enough to know that and to have erased the memories."

"But a good computer officer could either locate the alarm memory or tell if anyone had recently cleared the circuitry where those memories are stored?"

"Loraine Block," said Toombs wearily, "is a good computer officer, but she's under house arrest, and she's not likely to incriminate herself and her husband by untooling her own cover-ups for us."

"Then we'll send to the *Baidarka* for Françoise Loizos, our own computer officer," I told him, growing angry. "Would you have Verschuur, your communications man, ask Captain Sang to get her over here? She might as well send over our cargo master, too, so that he can supervise the loading of the ore." I turned away.

"Where are you going?" Toombs demanded.

"To visit Skolits. I assume he's back in the miners' recuperation facility near the main airlock." I waved a hand at the new stationmaster. "Don't bother to get up. Chaish and I can find it."

"Listen —" Toombs said, rising.

I turned back, my anger escaping me in a kind of hiss. "Listen, yourself. Whether from laziness or duplicity you're sitting on a pet hypothesis. So tell me something, Toombs: Did you ever have anyone check out the pressure suits in the airlock near the observatory?"

"No," he confessed, nonplused.

"Then why the hell don't you do that?"

Chaish and I exited the cluttered office. Side by side, we stalked down the dove-grey and chlorine-green corridor of Lupozny Station, a skategrace caught out in a realm of ice at least as dark as the one through which we had piloted the *Baidarka*

Corcoran Skolits turned out to be a man of fifty or so, as leathery-skinned as a baked Newhome pear. When

Chaish and I entered the miners' recuperation facility, he was sprawled shirtless across an air-divan, engrossed in an ancient videocassette whose program was unrolling on a battered player atop a work table. Men in long-billed caps and striped pantaloons were standing half-crouched on a kelly-green field. Occasionally they would lunge after a ball struck into the field by another such man wielding a bottle-shaped club.

Without looking up at us Skolits said, "They told me I couldn't leave until you'd talked to me."

"Who did?"

"Toombs, I guess. Synnöva was the one who relayed word."

Skolits neither looked at us nor invited us to sit down; he continued to watch the arcane goings-on on the videoplayer screen.

"They have a hideous crop of cassettes in this place," he finally said. "Lupozny bought them wholesale from a supplier working out of the Pollux backwater. 'Baseball,' this one says on the filing slip. It's really pretty amusing if you let yourself get into the play."

A group of people on benches behind a retaining wall suddenly began spilling onto the field where the men in pantaloons and caps were standing. One player bludgeoned an amok-running interloper to the grass with an elongated and pincerlike piece of leather.

"This part doesn't seem to have anything to do with scoring points,"

Skolits declared. "I turned down the accompanying sound because the blather of the overvoice was truly incomprehensible."

I interposed myself between the air-divan and the videoplayer. Skolits gave me a pained look, then glanced sidelong at Chaish — whose presence he had not detected until now. Pulling himself up, he turned almost respectfully towards the chode, his baked-brown face perceptibly fading a tone. I turned off the videoplayer. Now a solitary fluorescent lit the miners' recuperation room, and Skolits struggled to his feet. He was wearing slippers and a pair of netherjohns with a nylon draw cord.

"You're a skategrace," he said, surprised but not dumfounded. "What are my chances of riding back to Greater Bethlehem with you aboard the *Baidarka*?"

"When does your contract with Lupozny's company expire?"

"In about two-and-a-half standard months."

"Then you're probably stuck here at least until then. Were you hoping your contract expired with Lupozny?"

Stocky and muscular, going to flab around the middle, Skolits scuffed off a few steps in his lightweight slippers. "I knew better," he said doubtfully, plunging his hands into the seat pockets of his netherjohns. "I didn't see any harm in asking, though."

"You don't like it here?"

"Crazy about it. This is my tenth —

approaching my eleventh — year. I've been here since the beginning, nearly."

"And you're tired?" I prompted him.

Skolits looked at Chaish. "Bone-tired. Deep-gut-tired." Then he smiled, a wide, glittering, disarming smile. "But two and a half months is a pretty swift sprinkle. I can stand it. It'll go by trippety-trip. And if the *Baidarka* doesn't carry me out of here, some other skater will. With some other skategrace — probably a more experienced one."

I stammered the beginnings of another question.

"I can spot novices almost immediately," Skolits interrupted. "You two don't have the attunement of a long-standing skategrace, even with all your simulator training. You're still just getting to know each other outside Honeymoon Instruction." He pointed a stubby finger at me. "Am I right?"

"This was our first interstellar crossing," I admitted.

"Another infallible way to tell," Skolits continued relentlessly, "is the eyes of the human dyadmate."

"Skolits, we'd like to ask — " I was hoping to deflect him from his path. A vain hope.

"And yours are still unclouded, just as clear and pretty as an infant's. You're not any puppy, either."

"No, I'm not." I walked away, toward the lounge's ample shower facility, its tiled walls and floors gleaming a muted and unholy maroon, then

rounded on Skolits and changed the subject: "Did you like Frederick Lupozny?"

"Like him? Hell, no. The last person who liked Lupozny was his mother, and I wouldn't absolutely swear to that."

"Loraine Block says you've worked in the Anless system quite some time and you say since the beginning. How long, exactly?"

"Soon after Lupozny Station was built and operations began. When my latest two-and-a-half-year contract expires, though, I'll have been with the Lupozny enterprise a decade. Four contracts. No one else even *approaches* that record, Mr. Detchemendy."

"Ten years," I remarked. "Considering your opinion of Lupozny, what induced you to stick it out for so long?"

Skolits tugged sheepishly at his lower lip. "To tell you the truth, when I first came out here I was *persona non grata* with the Ecumos mercantile authorities. Lupozny took me on when no one else would give me a job. I'd talked to him about a position when he was visiting his factory liaison on Greater Behtlehem, and he brought me back to Anless with him aboard the E.C.S. *Challenger*. His hiring me was contingent on my accepting a two-and-a-half-year initial contract. Once I got to work, though, I found I liked it fine — especially since a miner wasn't expected, or even permitted, to associate much with the Boss Man. That's why I

kept re-upping — that and the pay.”

“What first got you in trouble with the Ecumos authorities?”

“Hey,” Skolits said, waving his hand in annoyance. “That’s prehistoric gossip. I don’t even like to talk about it.”

“I’d feel better if you told me.”

“Sure you would.” Skolits glanced nervously after Chaish, who had just stepped over the threshold of the shower room and disappeared among the gaudy maroon tiles. “Let’s just say I wooleyed an Ecumos cargo master and got away with half a shipment of natural silk from Lareina II. The affair was more complicated than that, but the details don’t matter. In the end, I was apprehended peddling these exotic dry-goods to the go-between of a successful clothier in Bethlehem’s southern capital. Justice was swift. After lock-up and rehab, Corcoran Skolits — his debt supposedly paid, mind you — couldn’t pick up iron filings with an electromagnet. No one wanted my services.”

“Except the Greater Bethlehem representative of the Lupozny Asteroid Mining Concern, I take it.”

“Yeah. That was Mr. Lupozny himself. I’ve never *liked* the exploitive bastard, but it’s impossible not to be a little *grateful* for what he did.”

“Did you kill him?”

Skolits laughed and shook his head. “Why the hell would I do that?” I’ve got nearly ten years’ money in reserve, and soon I’ll be going home,

back to Bethlehem. A man in my position would be an idiot to risk another lock-up and rehab, just because his boss had the personality of a tyrannosaurus.”

I followed Chaish toward the shower room, peripherally aware that Skolits was tagging along. “Then who aboard this station had the best motive for killing Lupozny?”

“You’ve got me, Mr. Detchemendy. I kept my nose out of the hair-pullings and petty scandals aboard this floating tin can. Sooner or later, though, Lupozny cheated, hurt, or humiliated just about anybody he had dealings with.”

Skolits enlarged upon his accusation against the dead stationmaster. He explained that when Lupozny had first opened up the Anless 32 system, after visiting it first-hand aboard the Ecumos survey ship he had hoped to get “robber-baron rich” mining The Rocks and shipping the ore back to the refineries and mills on Greater Bethlehem. He and his two partners had formed a co-op which they believed would prosper because of the relative ease with which heavy ore can be lifted away from the surface of an asteroid and, of course, because of the sheer abundance in the Anless system of these orbiting rocks. Unfortunately, many of the asteroids proved to be “dry cows,” great tumbling cinders of neither beauty nor any real economic promise. Although Lupozny’s visions of robber-baron wealth were blurred

by this discovery, he capitalized on the circumstance by buying out one of his partners.

"What happened to the other partner?" I asked. Chaish was nowhere in sight, but across the shower room was another tiled threshold, another room.

"Almost a year later, just before I took my problems to Lupozy on Bethlehem, the second partner had a bad accident prospecting a real 'dairy herd' — you know, ore-rich rock — in the innermost asteroid belt. He would have died if someone hadn't been with him. As it was, he lost his right leg and completely sickened on everything connected with Anless 32. Sold out to Lupozy as cheaply as the first fellow had, even though he'd seen a flash of promise in close. Went home to Earth for regeneration therapy. That's all he got out of his association with Lupozy — just enough to foot his refooting and maybe a bit extra for his initial investment."

"You proposing him as a suspect?"

Skolits laughed again. We were walking through the shower room, and his laughter reverberated eerily from the tiles.

I halted and faced the miner. "What about Misha and Loraine Block? You think they conspired to kill Lupozy?"

"It's possible, I guess. But how the hell should I know?"

Phosphores formed in my field of vision: **Come in here, Raymond. There's something you should see.**

"That's a utility and laundry

closet," Skolits said, apparently deducing from my expression that Chaish had just sent me a message. "We clean our suits in there, rack our helmets and air-recycling equipment — not much to look at, I'm afraid."

I stepped over the closet's tile threshold, and Skolits crowded into the opening behind me. Chaish was running an iridescent finger down the flank of the spacesuit hung from a detachable bar spanning the upper rear of the room. The arms, thigh, and chest of the suit were equipped with pockets with adhesive fasteners. Skolits' helmet sat on a shelf above the bar, blank-faced and imposing. Air-recycling equipment dangled from a hook to the left of the empty suit.

It's damp, Raymond, inside and out — as if its owner has only recently hosed it down.

I reached for the suit. "You do your own washing, Mr. Skolits?"

"Of course I do. We all do. Nobody else is going to do it for us. Have you ever seen one of these things after a miner's just come in from The Rocks? They're coated with dust, and if you don't get the stuff off, it can work its way through your suit and leave you wide open for a hematic boil-off the next time you clear an airlock. That's all the incentive I need to do my own washing."

"Where's your vacuum-suit under-skin?"

"The lining garment? It stunk, Mr. Detchemendy. I'd been wearing it a

long time and working hard. So I put it in the waste-conversion hopper in the lounge. That's also standard operating procedure."

"**Many miners use an airbrush to clean their suits,**" Chaish told me. "**Of course, that's only suitable for grime on the *outside*.**"

I tried to disguise the fact that Chaish had just communicated with me. "I'm sure it is." I said, responding to Skolits' last remark. "Let's go back to the lounge." I led the miner and my dyadmate through the shower room and into the rest-and-recreation area. Because Chaish was slower than Skolits, however, he kept looking back to see what was delaying her. When at length she joined us, the miner relaxed perceptibly.

"What brought you in to Lupozny Station at this precise time?" I asked Skolits, who had thrown himself onto the divan again.

"Fatigue. Simple fatigue."

"Did you have a full load of ore in your mining craft's tender?"

"No." Skolits rubbed his face with both hands. "It was more like half a load, really."

"How did Lupozny feel about miners coming in with less than a full load, especially here?"

"He disapproved heartily. But I was worn out, you understand, and it was either here or the fetch station. Here was closer."

"You seem to be all right now. Have you slept?"

"Slept? With everything that's happened since I came in?"

"You went with Toombs and Helmuth to see why Lupozny couldn't be roused?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What did you do — yourself, I mean — when you discovered the body?"

"I leaned over to see if he was really dead. He certainly seemed to be, blood as thick as jelly on the floor. I didn't touch the bastard, though."

"What about the others?"

"Toombs eventually nudged him over a bit, to see the wound. Synnöva hung back, and after looking at Lupozny"

"What?" I urged him.

"Well, I guess I hung back, too. That's really all there was to it. Afterwards we waited for the *Baidarka* to arrive, me in here and the others in their places."

I was out of questions, and Skolits was obviously ready for us to go. Suddenly, though, he smiled winningly and jabbed a forefinger at the work table opposite the air-divan.

"How about turning the videoplayer back on for me? I think I'm on the verge of figuring out that game."

Chaish moved glidingly to the electronic box and touched it to life. The men in duck-billed caps and striped pantaloons were still watching members of their former audience cavort and caper on their playing field. The entire scene was so removed from

the insular realities of Lupozny Station that I stared at it as intently as did Skolits.

****Come on, Raymond****

The bright violet strips of Chaish's respiration ribbons were fluttering silently in her head. They turned my attention away from the videoplayer, and I sheepishly followed my dyad-mate out of the miners' recuperation facility.

Back in the control center we found Sinclair Toombs with the remainder of the station's other personnel, excepting only the Blocks. Hans Verschuur, Daphne Kaunas, and Synnöva sat languidly at their cubbyholes in the hub. Françoise Loizos and Krishna Rai had not yet come over from the *Baidarka*, although Verschuur acknowledged that he had sent for them and they were probably on their way. It was a glum little gathering we confronted, Chaish and I.

"What did you find out from Skolits?" asked Toombs, perched on the edge of one of the hub's metal and plastic consoles.

"I don't know," I said.

****That he is the murderer,****
Chaish interjected.

But of course I was the only one who registered this accusation. Puzzled and surprised, I turned to my dyad-mate. The chode, who do not kill their own kind, usually enter into the emotional affairs of humanity solely within

the framework of the skategrace relationship, which is so special that only an infinitesimal fraction of their number ever become even vaguely familiar with the human mind. Of course, the same is true of human relationships with the chode. That we do not yet refrain from killing one another must strike them — if even a rough translation of their attitude is possible — as symptomatic of a species-wide spiritual malaise. Still, I was shocked that Chaish had singled out Skolits as the murderer on the basis of what had seemed to me an inconclusive interview. Further, her message to me pulsed with ... well, anger, outrage, and a host of other negative emotions; all of them disproportionate to her personal stake in the death of an opportunist and bully like Frederick Lupozny.

"What makes you think that?" I asked her, undoubtedly bewildering the others in the control center. "The damp spacesuit?"

****In part, yes.****

"But that doesn't convict him, Chaish. There seems to be no way he could have got from the recuperation area to Lupozny's room."

****A lifeboat near the main airlock gave him an exit from the station. Another in the bay just off Lupozny's quarters provided a means of re-entry. There's no alarm circuit to tell when anyone enters or exits a lifeboat.****

"Chaish, Mr. Toombs has already told us that none of the lifeboats at-

tached to the station is depressurized. No one could have entered the station-master's room through a fully pressurized remora craft." I turned to Sinclair Toombs. "Chaish thinks Skolits killed Lupozny."

Synnöva Helmuth was the first to react. "Corcoran? He's a little queer from spending so much time among The Rocks, but he's not a murderer. His rudeness comes from not being around other people very much."

"Is Misha Block a murderer?" I asked her. "Is Loraine Block a murderer's accomplice?"

The assay officer glanced at Toombs. "No," she said, with reasonable firmness. "I've never believed that, either."

"You still haven't talked to Block himself," Toombs reminded me.

"I don't really expect his story to be any different from his wife's. — Did you check out the suits in the observatory airlock?"

"I did." Toombs glanced away — up the open corridor toward both his office and the observatory. "None of them is blood-drenched inside, if that jibes with your own interpretation of events."

"I don't *have* an interpretation, Mr. Toombs. Are any of them damp?"

"Damp? Of course not."

"Skolits' was. It still is. He washed it down not too long ago."

"That's not unusual for a miner. They come in grime-coated." But his expression altered, as if a long-legged

doubt about the Blocks' culpability was crawling across his conscience. "That's what the utility closet is for, cleaning dusty gear."

"Chaish says it's just as common to dislodge the grime with an airbrush as with a spray of water. Is that true?"

"Maybe. Both methods are employed. That's why the utility room is just off the shower."

"But an airbrush wouldn't be your first choice if you'd gotten blood in your suit lining and on your undergarment, too. You'd want to wash away the dried material. Some of the blood on the outside would boil away from lack of pressure, of course — but whichever portions had frozen would require more than an airbrush to dislodge. — and Skolits conveniently disposed of his underskin. As per custom, of course."

Toombs took aim at the long-legged doubt making furry footprints on his peace of mind: "But Skolits couldn't have got down there, and the Blocks have a motive for conspiring to kill Lupozny!"

"And you have a motive for wanting to believe it's them who did it," Synnöva Helmuth said, her voice quavering.

Before Toombs could respond, Verschuur swiveled around to the communications console and raised his right hand for silence.

"Your friends are coming in," he told me softly. "I'm letting them into the spaceboat hangar." He nodded at

Daphne Kaunas, the dark-skinned life-systems officer, and she switched on the pumps whose function was to empty the main airlock of air. A bell-like alarm sounded in the console and in the corridors of Lupozny Station, a monstrous death rattle. No one would stumble inadvertently into the main airlock while that rattle was shaking the station — a period of four or five minutes, although, because of the persistent alarm, it seemed much longer. Finally the noise ceased, to be replaced as warning by a general dimming of the station's lights and a flickering of red fluorescents in the corridors. "They're in," Verschuur said, and he again nodded at Kaunas, who activated a second set of pumps to repressurize the hangar in the main airlock. This process took another four or five minutes.

"Somebody ought to go down there to meet them," Synnöva Helmuth said.

Toombs glared at her. "Go on, then. Bring them back with you." He jumped down from the console and turned toward Chaish. "What motive did Corcoran Skolits have? Presuming of course that he could outwit the airlock alarms, the anomalies of lifeboat pressurization, and every other damn obstacle we've already pointed out to you."

"**Raymond,**" Chaish hailed me, ignoring Toombs, "**come into the corridor with me for a moment.**"

Without a word to the new station

master or anyone else, I followed my dyadmate into the corridor leading to Lupozny's quarters. Helmuth brushed past us on her way down the contiguous passage to the spaceboat hangar to greet Loizos and Rai. We watched her go.

Then Chaish put her wide scaled back to the three human beings still occupying the control center. In the lee of her sheltering bulk Chaish opened her right hand and showed me an object that seemed to shimmer and dance like a three-dimensional phosphene. On closer inspection I saw that it was the pendant of a necklace, but so radiant and amorphous a pendant that I couldn't really tell either its color or its shape. First it was a kind of blood-black star, then an emerald crescent, then an utterly transparent disk — so many things in turn that I raised my eyes and waited for a cogent explanation. Chaish closed her satiny fingers around the object.

"What is it?" I asked, sotto voce.

"**The forty-ninth character,**" Chaish replied. "**Or, rather, a chode artifact representing that character. A piece of Essencialist jewelry for those among devotees of the sect who have achieved to the highest spiritual status.**"

Stymied by this "explanation," I shook my head.

"**I am not of the Essencialist creed, Raymond. If I were, I would not have shown this to you. The forty-ninth character is the ineffable phosphene. It

is not for mere human beings to look upon. Nor should chode infidels like myself haul about a replica of this phosphene as if it were nothing but a grimy piece of currency. Simply holding it, Raymond, I defile both the character and myself. Or so our Essencialists believe.**

"Where did you get it, Chaish?"

It was in one of the pockets of Corcoran Skolits' spacesuit, and it marks him indelibly as the station-master's murderer.

"Why? And where would Skolits lay his hands on a necklace like that?"

Chaish handed me the artifact representing the ineffable phosphene.

Conceal it, Raymnd. I don't wish to carry it any longer. Conceal it on your person.

The pendant and its gun-metal-blue chain felt alternately icelike and blistering hot. I slipped them into a tunic pocket.

"What does it stand for, the forty-ninth character?"

God. Cosmos. Essence.

"None of those things is ineffable, Chaish. You've just expressed all three of them, in a few of the forty-eight phosphenes by which you ordinarily communicate with me. I don't understand the sacred or forbidden aspect of the character."

No, Chaish agreed, **you don't.**

Confused, I looked back down the perpendicular corridor to the spaceboat hangar. Synnöva Helmuth was

leading the *Baidarka's* computer officer and cargo master toward us. Neither had yet had time to unsuit. As a consequence, Rai and Loizos, both relatively graceful people, lumbered toward us in their boots. A bigger surprise was the sudden emergence of Corcoran Skolits from the recuperation facility beyond the hangar. Wearing a tunic, he hurried past Helmuth's party, careened forward, and abruptly pulled up in front of Chaish and me, his chest heaving and his nostrils dilating cavernously.

"What are you going to do now?" he demanded. "Your dyadmate's stolen something of mine!"

Tell Mr. Skolits we're going to demonstrate how and perhaps why he murdered Frederick Lupozny, Chaish declared in hard-edged phosphenes.

I told him.

Ten minutes later I was fully space-suited, except that I carried my helmet in the crook of my right arm. Françoise Loizos was at work in the hub on the main computer, rummaging its memory circuits to determine if Loraine Block had intercepted an airlock alarm. Chaish was convinced that her presence aboard Lupozny Station was superfluous now, but I had put her to work in the interest of achieving a reasonably thorough investigation. Krishna Rai, meanwhile, had installed himself near the lifeboat bay in Lupozny's quarters — on the ex

plicit but secret instructions of my dyadmate, who would no longer brook any argument from me. The immediate demonstration of Skolits' guilt seemed to obsess her.

Five of us — Skolits, Toombs, Helmut, Chaish, and I — had entered the hangar containing Skolits' crusty mining craft and the two oversized spaceboats from the *Baidarka*. The hangar was commodious, but no space was wasted. In the control center I had observed that it took only four or five minutes to evacuate this chamber of air and a similar length of time to restore its pressurization. But Chaish led us through the main airlock to an auxiliary corridor leading to the miners' recuperation facility. Above this tiny corridor, accessible by a set of narrow metal stairs, was a lifeboat bay. Chaish believed that Skolits had used the lifeboat in this housing as an escape hatch to the station's hull.

The lifeboats on Lupozny Station were remora craft — unlike the larger dinghies by which first Chaish and I, and then Françoise Loizos and our Hindi cargo master, had arrived from the *Baidarka*. And unlike, too, the mining craft which Skolits had piloted in from the outermost asteroid belt. These were cruising vessels incapable of docking with the station; they had to enter the hangar of the main airlock in order to unload and take on cargo or passengers.

A remora, however, is designed for escapes, hull-inspection tours, short

jaunts among the station's cargo canisters, and brief visits to nearby asteroids. It takes its name from those free-loading marine creatures, native to the waters of Earth, that attach themselves to whales, sharks, and sea turtles by means of a sucking disk on the tops of their heads. Each boat is a tubular creature not too different in design from Lupozny Station itself — if you mentally cut away the perpendicular pseudopod containing the station's spaceboat hangar and its access corridor.

Visualize it this way: The nose of the remora craft slips into a housing that extends from the station's hull and clasps itself firmly around the forward third of the lifeboat. The housing collar creates an airtight seal as soon as the remora has nosed itself into docking position. Inside this collar are three airtight hatches, and anyone climbing toward the lifeboat from the station must pass through each hatch in turn. None of these hatches will open unless the atmospheric pressure is the same on both sides. The final door is the hatch in the nose of the remora craft itself, positioned so that it need not line up exactly with any other hatch; it remains unblocked even should the remora enter the docking sheath cattywampus. This hatch, like the others, will not open unless bookended by areas of equivalent air pressure.

Chaish helped me put my helmet on. **Go into the remora, Raymond. Climb out onto the hull through the aft

escape hatch and proceed over the station to Lupozny's quarters. Try each of the lifeboats connecting with the bay in his room.**

"They're pressurized," I protested. "I won't be able to get in."

Skolits, Toombs, and Helmuth were standing below the metal platform giving onto the lifeboat bay. Looking down through my faceplate, I could see them discussing the likelihood of my gaining entry to the dead man's cabin. Their voices — once Chaish had sealed and locked my helmet — were virtually inaudible. I knew with certainty only that Skolits had been kibitzing our experiment from the beginning. How could we put so much credence — even a degree of credence — in the accusation of a chode, a species about whose intellectual and spiritual lives we really knew so very little?

Chaish had still not shown the necklace she had found in the miner's spacesuit to anyone but me, and Skolits' endless stream of self-justifying chatter had finally led me, willy-nilly, to wonder if she were not indeed maliciously persecuting him for something other than Lupozny's murder. Was the simple possession of a chode artifact a crime? And was Chaish setting my own life at hazard to indict Skolits for the violation of an alien taboo?

**Try to get in, Raymond. If none of the remoras at Lupozny's end of the station permits you entry, you'll still be able to come back aboard through

this lifeboat. There's no real danger.** My dyadmate had sensed my uneasiness; she had also discovered its cause. Her melting, mirrorlike eyes gave me back my own distorted reflection, an ugly thing, and I turned away from it to the first hatch of the lifeboat bay.

Entering the remora proved rebukingly easy. Each door opened at a crank and a tug. Passing through the last one, I found myself in a narrow fuselage designed for two passengers — three or four in a pinch — and equipped with its own small gravity generator and life-support systems, including provisions, oxygen-recycling gear, and air pumps.

Getting out of the remora onto the station's hull would be equally easy. I sealed the nose hatch, double-checked this seal, and then slid back and side-long into the pilot's couch. Here I began to pump the air out of the remora into the storage compressors mounted aft on the fuselage. This took less than two minutes. When the interior of the lifeboat was at the same pressure as space itself, I slipped away from the instrument panel and pushed myself aft. Because the craft's gravity generator wasn't in operation now, I floated the length of the lifeboat. I braced myself beneath the escape hatch and pushed it open as effortlessly as if it were a piece of perforated cardboard. A rime of stars hung in the night overhead.

As soon as I had squeezed through

the hatch onto the remora's cold, grey back, I kicked the cover shut and clambered over the docking collar to the hull of Lupozy Station. The remora would remain depressurized until someone inside the station activated its pumps from the emergency control near the stairs by which Chaish and I had climbed to the bay — or until I re-entered the lifeboat and switched on its pumps from the forward instrument panel. It was imperative, however, that anyone exiting a remora through its rearward hatch pause long enough to close its cover — for the sake of those inside the station — and I had scrupulously done that. Afterwards, I turned and made a cautious beeline toward the station's hub.

Anless 32 bathed everything in a dull red glare. Where shadows fell, however, the integument of the station was so black as to be nearly indistinguishable from the backdrop of space itself. I felt like a man walking over a precarious suspension bridge.

Off to my left rode the reassuring bulk of the E.C.S. *Baidarka*, a spidery colossus becalmed in an invisible web. Storage canisters floated dreamily along with the station as it circled its star, and I regarded these tumbling tag-alongs as companions and familiars. My fear of Chaish's motives had begun to evaporate. It was easier — and far more reasonable — to fear the vast, indifferent night.

In my unwieldy magnetized boots — the station's gravity generators

don't service the hull, of course — it took me several minutes to reach the hub and make my way to the lifeboat bays at Lupozy's end of the station. When I did arrive, I climbed gingerly over the housing collar of the first of three remora craft and tried to pry open its hatch. The thing wouldn't budge. Nor did its failure to open surprise me. I half believed that for unknowable reasons of her own Chaish was buying time: My presence on the hull was a complicated bit of misdirection whose purpose was to let her scrounge about inside for the hat with the rabbit in it. What hat? What rabbit?

I stalked noseward, mounted the housing collar, and climbed atop the second of the three lifeboats. After shuffling over the remora's hull, I bent at the waist and pulled indifferently at the hatch. Nothing, I told myself — whereupon, amazingly, the damn thing opened!

Dependent for traction on my magnetized boots, I was almost catapulted into space.

I saved myself by hanging on the hatch cover. When my boots were again safely clamped to metal, I eased them over the lip of the opening. After descending bodily into the remora, I pulled the hatch to and peered about. My genuine expectation was that Lupozy's killer — not Misha Block or Corcoran Skolits, but someone infinitely more brutal and bloodthirsty — would spring out of the darkness to

slash my suit and leave me crumpled against a bulkhead to gasp out my final breath. That didn't happen. I freed my flashlight from my belt and poled it about in a satisfyingly vain search for my imaginary nemesis. Then I went forward and activated the pumps to restore cabin pressurization.

Had Skolits, after his trip across the hull from the bay near the recuperation facility, also found an airless remora awaiting him? It didn't seem likely. What, exactly, were Chaish and I demonstrating then?

As soon as the lifeboat had attained full pressurization, I unlocked my helmet and removed it. Anxious to learn what Chaish and the others were doing, I duck-walked into the lifeboat's nose, opened the hatch, and eased myself into the docking collar. Two more such doors lay ahead. The final one admitted me to the corridor mouth off Lupozny's room. I had made it. No alarms had sounded, and the trip, if you discounted the bugaboos of my imagination, had been uneventful.

"Hello, Mr. Detchemendy. Very good to see you."

I jumped sideways. A pudgy brown face was staring at me from the corridor entrance. It was Krishna Rai, the *Baidarka's* cargo master. I remembered, belatedly, that Chaish had dispatched him to the site of the murder without the others' knowledge. But why?

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Letting you in," Rai informed me. "Your dyadmate instructed me so to do, using hand signs and whatnot. While you were putting on your suit."

"This proves nothing," I said, shaking my head, disappointed. "You let me in." I sat down on a bench outside the lifeboat bay but just inside the dead stationmaster's cabin. Disgustedly, I began pulling off my suit. Rai shrugged and sat down beside me.

A moment later Chaish, Toombs, Helmuth, and Skolits entered the room from the main corridor. Toombs evinced some real surprise at seeing me back inside, but Skolits quickly deduced that Rai had evacuated the remora from the interior lifeboat bay so that I could enter it, restore its pressurization, and so come aboard the station through the hatches in docking collar.

"They're wasting your time," Skolits told Toombs animatedly. "Of course he was able to get back in. He had an accomplice." The miner gestured contemptuously at Rai, who favored Skolits with a shy, benign grin. "But the only accomplice the murderer could have had was Lupozny himself, and it isn't a damn bit likely that Lupozny would evacuate a remora just so his killer could have undetectable access to his person."

I stared at the floor. About two meters from my right boot was the yellow-green chalk loop delineating the spot where Lupozny had dropped

his miniature telescope. I carried out some formless computations in my head, and these provided me with a symmetrical insight:

Lupozny had not dropped the telescope as a clue to the identity of his murderer. No, he had simply been venting, even in his death throes, the volcanic pressures of his temperament. He had tried to *throw* the telescope at his fleeing assailant, and it had landed where it had because the guilty party had been heading for the lifeboat bay.

Despite his protests to the contrary, Skolits was our man. I didn't know *why* yet, but I knew *how*, and my indignation at the miner's histrionics soiled my tongue in my mouth.

Lupozny let Skolits in, Chaish told me, broadcasting phosphenes from across the room. **Approaching the station in his mining craft, Skolits used a private radio channel to request a confidential audience. The station-master was expecting him, Raymond.**

"Of course he was," I said aloud, toeing off first one boot and then the other. I stood and slipped out of my suit's torso sheath. A moment later everyone in the room was watching me as if I were an unfamiliar variety of snake that had just shed last winter's skin. I remembered something that Loraine Block had mentioned in passing.

"Once upon a time," I said, looking directly at Corcoran Skolits, "you were Frederick Lupozny's lover."

He met this statement unflinchingly.

"So what? His affection for me died six or seven years ago, and I never had a whit for him to begin with. I did the expedient. Any number of miners out here — male and female alike — have visited this room at his invitation."

"Or command," I amended. "In any case, his preference was ordinarily isoclinic, wasn't it?"

"None of that was any of my business —"

"But you knew his preferences, didn't you? And on this occasion, requesting a confidential meeting, you let him know you wouldn't be disturbed if your interview developed into a sort of a commemorative tryst, say."

Skolits lifted his eyebrows — as if to suggest that they were in the presence of a madman. But Synnöva Helmuth was scrutinizing the miner's face skeptically, and he could feel her gaze upon him. Nor was Tombs buying the man's ambiguous nonchalance outright.

"Lupozny had always liked you," I bore on. "He respected your ability, and he was comfortable with the fact that of all those ever connected with the Anless operation, you had survived the longest. That's why he was willing to renew the physical aspect of your early relationship. It pleased him that you had suggested its resumption yourself. He agreed to the secret 'audience' not because he was ashamed for others to know, but because he didn't believe this final meeting was anybody else's business. He was a sentimental

Ogre, this particular Lupozy."

"Damn it!" Skolits suddenly cried. "My visiting Lupozy had nothing to do with our early relationship! That was dead, completely dead!"

These words hung in the air like a net. One beat. Two beats. Three. When they finally descended, Skolits was enmeshed. He looked from Helmuth to Toombs and back again. It was the assay officer's affection and forgiveness he most seemed to crave, however, and she touched his arm sympathetically.

"Then you *were* really in here," she said. "Why?"

Skolits' eyes darted about among us — not in a pleading or even a self-pitying way, but like those of a captured animal comprehending the futility of further struggle. I think he was surprised to discover that no one in the room — not even Raymond Detchemendy, who had just pursued him to the cliff brink — appeared jubilant at the prospect of his fall. Lupozy, the man he had killed, had not been a popular figure.

Then I looked at Chaish, my dyadmate.

Her bodymail gleamed ferociously in the fluorescents, her eyes played upon Skolits like interrogation lamps, and her respiration ribbons fluttered audibly in her head. She alone seemed to feel no sorrow for the miner; no inclination to forgive.

I was frightened for Skolits. He was one of my own kind, even if he was a

murderer, and to see him a helpless victim of my dyadmate's terrible enmity made me uneasy and defensive.

The miner shook free of Helmuth's touch and sat down in the empty chair behind Lupozy's desk. "I didn't come here to kill him," he said softly. "I came here to ask if he would release me from my contract a little early and let me go back to Greater Bethlehem aboard the *Baidarka*."

Sinclair Toombs strolled into the furry chalk outline of Lupozy's corpse, now ensconced in a cold coffin next door. "He gave you a confidential audience for that? Why the secrecy?"

"Well, it's like Mr. Detchemendy implied," Skolits confessed. "Coming in from The Rocks, I hinted to Lupozy that I wouldn't mind a friendly sort of reunion — an *intimate* sort of reunion if he'd also give me a chance to talk a little friendly business."

"But why," Toombs persisted, "did you have to meet in secret to discuss an early-out from your contract?"

"We didn't, I suppose," Skolits said, staring at the clasp in which Lupozy had kept the knife that had slain him. "I just thought I'd have a better chance to convince him to let me go if I made the meeting seem ... well, like old times." Lifting his head, he appealed to Helmuth. "You knew Lupozy, Synnöva. If you ever wanted anything from him, you had to bring out every weapon in your arsenal of persuasion to get it. It couldn't hurt, I thought, even if it was a bald-faced lie,

saying I still cared for him a little." Anger had crept back into Skolits' voice, and he flipped a metal stylus off the desk with his right forefinger.

It landed at my feet. I picked it up and approached the desk with it. "And you murdered Lupozny because he wouldn't let you leave the Anless 32 boonies a couple of months ahead of schedule? That's crazy. You said yourself that two-and-a-half months is a pretty swift sprinkle."

Skolits looked up at me bemusedly. Then he shut his eyes, clenched his teeth, and began swinging his head from side to side in impotent anguish. His right hand punctuated this rhythm with feeble karate chops to the edge of Lupozny's desk. He was trying hard not to weep. No one spoke.

Show him the forty-ninth character, Chaish commanded me, the phosphenes drifting into my vision like minutely carved grains of sleet. **Put the necklace before him, Raymond, and let him explain it.**

I glanced at Chaish, who, still loitering near the room's doorway, gave me a peremptory nod but kept her eyes fixed mercilessly on Skolits. I had forgotten the strange artifact that Chaish had found in the miner's spacesuit. I removed the necklace from my pocket, looked at the piece of stone or plastic on its chain, and then dangled the pendant before Skolits' eyes.

"Skolits," I said. "Skolits, tell us what this is."

He refused to open his eyes. "I've been waiting for that," he whispered. Aloud he said, "Dear God, even a decade didn't put me in the clear."

"Of what?" Helmuth asked, putting her hand on his back.

Skolits opened his eyes and blinked at the pendant hanging before him. "Synnöva," he said, "I didn't kill Lupozny because he wouldn't let me out of my contract early. I killed him because he threatened to keep me here as long as he himself intended to stay — four more years; six; hell, maybe another ten. That's why, seeing the knife on his desk, I grabbed it up and buried it in the bastard's chest as deep as I could plunge the bloody thing."

Skolits let his eyes slide away from the pendant and mist over with the melancholy weather of recollection. "Even with his knife in him up to the hilt, he tottered after me a few steps. I was afraid he'd catch me, shake me to pieces before he fell — *do something* inhuman and terrible. He didn't, though. I heard the telescope clatter to the floor as I was trying to open the first hatch in the lifeboat bay, and that told me he was probably done for. I came back and saw him dead and couldn't believe that I had done it. Lupozny was the first man I've ever killed, Synnöva," he concluded, glancing over his shoulder at the assay officer for commiseration.

I dropped the chode pendant and its chain onto the desk. "This," I said. "Lupozny was blackmailing you with

this?"

Skolits' hand crept forward over the desk to pick up the necklace, but a shadow fell across him and he desisted. Chaish was beside us, almost evil-seeming in her flickering bodymail and her inscrutable self-possession. She scooped the chode necklace — with its Essencialist pendant forbidden the sight of unbelievers, of which she herself was self-confessedly one — away from the miner's grasp. Then she donned the pendant and let it glisten against the platelets of her breasts.

"**Tell him to explain how the forty-ninth character came into his possession, Raymond.**"

"You already know, don't you, Chaish?"

"**I believe I do. Although Frederick Lupozny may have been this man's first *human* victim, he has taken the life of an intelligent creature at least once before. I would like to know what prompted him to kill one of my own kind.**"

A few moments later I had Skolits unraveling, albeit jerkily, the ill-woven skein of his life before coming to Anless 32 with Lupozny. His story about bilking an Ecumos cargo master of a shipment of Lareina silk had been a cover for the details of the real difficulties of his past. Those had begun nearly fourteen years ago on Greater Bethlehem.

In fulfillment of a boyhood dream Skolits had achieved admission to a skategrace academy on his home

world, eventually obtaining a chode partner of Essencialist background and then undertaking with this enigmatic creature the initial simulator tests designed to measure the apprentice dyad's ability to navigate Black Ice. He and his partner had not done badly, although Skolits was slow to pick up on the semantic distinctions among various phosphenes, both singly and in combination. He didn't seem to have the head for it, and the patterns broadcast at him by his Essencialist dyad-mate began to take on for him the quality of a severe optical affliction. He suffered headaches and nausea. Because he was slow to learn the skategrace "language," his dyad's mentor suggested that sleep-screenings, in conjunction with recorded translations, might be one means of breaking through his block. The upshot was that for a two-month period — even when he took to his bed at the end of a day of chart work and simulator tests — Skolits had no reprieve from the disorienting flurry of his partner's phosphene broadcasts. His sleep was disrupted, and his appetite failed.

"Finally," Skolits said, still perched on the forward edge of Lupozny's chair, "I lost my sight altogether. Apparently it was an attack of hysterical blindness, but to me it was real and the darkness seemed impenetrable and terrifying. The only good thing about it was that it kept out those vicious, biting phosphenes. They'd been like poisonous flying insects, stinging and

flashing, and I hadn't been able to escape them even with my eyes shut. My 'blindness' kept them out, though. It also drove me crazy with fear that I'd live the rest of my life in that darkness. The thought that I might be blind forever" His voice dovetailed to a sigh.

"What happened?" Synnöva Helmut asked.

"A week was all it lasted. I came out of my blindness. They reintroduced me slowly to the skategrace training. Once I had cleared the hurdle of chode communication, everyone said my partner and I would be an extremely adaptable dyad. It's just that I never cleared that hurdle. It seemed to me that my partner was secretly trying to blind me — prematurely, you know, and maliciously rather than simply in the natural course of our dyadship."

"It takes about twenty years," I put in. "Sometimes longer. Maliciousness has nothing to do with it. Besides, you're permitted to retire early if you've made the requisite number of Black Ice crossings. Your fears were groundless, Skolits."

"Don't you think I know that?" he barked, standing up and staring at me challengingly. Then, as if rebuking himself, he added, "Now."

"**He killed his dyadmate,**" Chaish broadcast, plainly uncomprehending, "**because he feared his dyadmate was purposely trying to blind him?*" Her gaze never left the miner's face, and he recoiled from her scrutiny

by turning one shoulder to her and staring at his hands.

I relayed Chaish's question.

"Yes," he said. "I killed him in his sleep, stopping his respiration ribbons, plugging the chambers, with my hands. I held him to his board with the full weight of my body. My vision exploded with phosphenes as he struggled, but I didn't let go and he was dead much sooner than I had expected him to be." Skolits turned and pointed at the pendant hanging from Chaish's neck. "I found that with my dyadmate's personal belongings and took it as a keepsake. Then I fled, staying away from the main population centers of Greater Bethlehem and living off the countryside. That was when I became Corcoran Skolits, changing my real name to this one."

"But eventually you looked up Frederick Lupozny?"

"He was related to me in some distant, oblique way, and during our first interview in Lake Iguana, the southern capital, he recognized my talisman for what it was — like an idiot, I was fiddling with it as we talked — and realized that seated before him was the notorious fugitive who had murdered his chode dyadmate four years ago. He said he'd give me a job and get me off-planet if I yielded the necklace to him and signed an initial two-and-a-half-year contract. Which I did."

"He used the necklace to ensure your loyalty," I said. "You signed three more two-and-a-half-year contracts

because he threatened to expose your crime."

"No," Skolits said. "I signed those other contracts because I was content to stay out here until virtually no one on Greater Bethlehem remembered or gave a damn that the chode half of a skategrace had been murdered by his human partner many years ago. I was waiting until it was safe to go home. I was born on Greater Bethlehem, you see, and it seemed to me that at last I had outrun my guilt and earned my passage home. I hadn't even *seen* that thing —" Skolits gestured at the pendant — "for ten years. And then Lupozny — to keep me off the *Baidarka* and to bind me to him for another interminable decade — materializes that infernal piece of chode glass and tells me I'm going nowhere until it pleases his majesty for me to go. That was when —" He stopped.

"You grabbed up the knife and killed him."

Skolits looked almost grateful that I had completed his thought for him. He sat back down in Lupozny's chair and closed his eyes. Toombs and Helmuth exchanged a melancholy glance.

"It wasn't until Mr. Toombs asked me to come with him and Synnöva to see what was wrong with Lupozny that I thought about the depressurized remora. I realized then that it might incriminate me. So while they were cluck-clucking over the body, I sidled into the lifeboat bay and activated the

remora's compressor pumps. At the time, you know, I thought how lucky I was that they're such silent operators, those pumps. And I thought that finally I was home free. If I could last another couple of months, I'd be saying hello again to Greater Bethlehem. The *Baidarka* wasn't the only light-skater on The Ice."

"**I want no more of this, Raymond. I'm going to join Françoise in the control center. Come when you're ready.**"

These various phosphene patterns betrayed the depth of Chais's agitation; they were blurred and surprisingly ephemeral, so swift I hardly had time to interpret them. Then, with phantomesque grace and disdain she glided away from the moral ambiguities and the tangled interior lives of every human being in Lupozny's room, including mine.

Synnöva Helmuth was crouched before Skolits, her hands on his knees. "Would you have let Loraine and Misha suffer the punishment for something you did, Corcoran? I can't believe you'd let that happen."

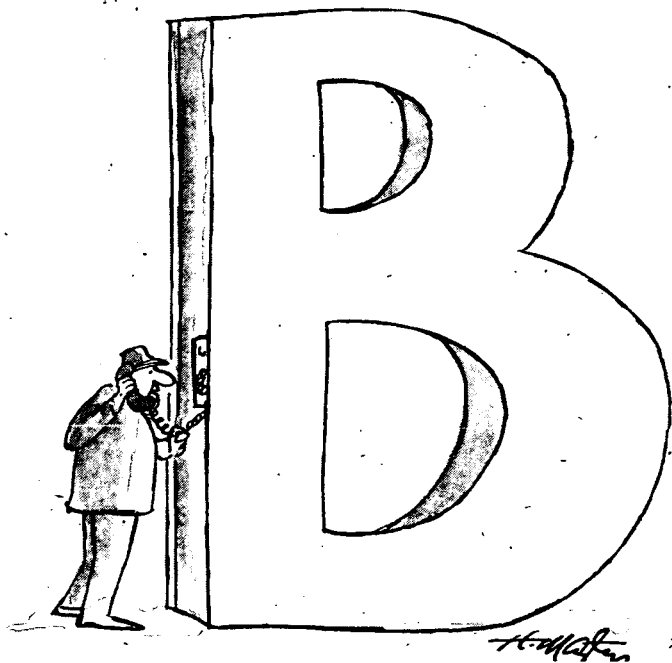
Skolits' response was quick and cold. "Believe it," he said, not looking at the woman. "Don't be a fool, Synnöva — believe it."

I intend to remain the human half of a skategrace until the onset of blindness disqualifies me. Maybe by that time I will have obtained to a partial

understanding of Chaish Qu'chosh, and she of me. And in my blindness, sight. Or so I hope. They say that the blindness of a chode's superannuated human partner is not complete, that phosphene broadcasts still occasionally filter through. Good. I am hopeful that before I die my understanding of the chode and of the fallible species of which I am a member may unite in a single blinding, nonpareil phosphene. Then I will have become an Essencialist

on my own terms, and my secret forty-ninth character will be forever proof against theft or misinterpretation.

In the meantime, the story I have just told has a kind of satisfying parody of a happy ending. Corcoran Skolits, you see, achieved a portion of his desire: He was able to return to Greater Bethlehém aboard the *Baidarka*, two and a half months before the expiration of his contract.



"Chief, this is Haskins. As per instructions, I've proceeded from point A to Point B. What now?"

Robert Young's new story is about Earth's first starship and the man who builds it, a man whose dream began during one summer when he was 10 . . .

The Summer of the Fallen Star

BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

The fallen star had lain in a clearing in the woods behind his father's farm, not far from the lip of the ravine into which it was destined to be bulldozed and buried. It was partially covered with moss, and at first glance appeared to be nothing more than a big egg-shaped boulder. Only when you looked close could you see the fissures and the charred areas that provided prima facie evidence of its fiery passage through the atmosphere.

A true meteor, of course, would have created a crater and wiped out part of the woods, but the kids who lived in the vicinity weren't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, Larkin least of all.

Even in those days he'd been a loner, and almost always, when he visited the clearing where the fallen star lay, he did so alone. The summer when he was 10 was when he visited it

the most often. At the time, he'd been blissfully unaware that the star was doomed—that the following spring the woods would be cleared to make room for a housing development.

He would sit there in the warm sun on long summer afternoons and gaze at the star and make up stories about it. In one of the stories it was an alien spaceship—a spaceship that had malfunctioned while in the vicinity of the solar system and made a forced landing on Earth. A spaceship whose pilot had perished during passage through the atmosphere, or who, unable to get out of the ship because of injuries suffered during the forced landing, had died either from starvation or from a lack of oxygen.

In a sense, the fallen star had shaped Larkin's life.

* * *

"Oh, you're Mr. Larkin. *The Mr. Larkin*. Sorry I didn't recognize you, sir. Go right on through."

"Thanks," Larkin said, zipping the front of his nylon jacket back over the ID card clipped to his shirt pocket.

"I can understand why you'd want to make a last-minute inspection," the guard at the launch-pad gate went on. "If she was my ship—if I'd built her, that is, like you did—I'd want to make sure she was okay too. Incidentally, sir, do you have any idea why they're holding—why countdown was stopped and almost everybody was sent home?"

"None whatsoever," Larkin lied.

The Brunhilde-Valkyrie launch-complex (Scandinavian mythology had recently become the rage in space circles was reminiscent of the Apollo-Saturn complex (Launch Complex 39), now in mothballs. The Launch Control Center, a long rectangular structure, stood next to the giant Vertical Assembly Building and, in juxtaposition to it, appeared like a medium-sized building block yet to be set in place. The pad itself (unlike Launch Complex 39, there was only one) was linked to the VAB by a wide, three-mile-long crawlerway, down which, three days ago, the mobile launcher had carried the Valkyrie launch vehicle and the Brunhilde 2 spacecraft.

Larkin began walking toward the massive support-pedestal on which the mobile launch and the Brunhilde 2-Valkyrie had been positioned. Driv-

ing down the new highway that ran the length of the crawlerway and gave on to the parking area, he had become increasingly aware of the towering spaceship. Now, as he walked through the lake of light created by the floodlights, his awareness intensified. The ship, with its slender escape tower affixed to the nose of the command module, seemed to touch the hem of Heaven. Beside it, taller yet, the launch-and service-tower, even with all of its extensions withdrawn save for the walkway that gave access to the hatch, brought to mind the great ash tree, Yggdrasil.

The Brunhilde 2 spacecraft atop the third Valkyrie stage was the second offspring of Larkin's quarter-of-a-century marriage to his Dream. Its slightly less, sophisticated older sister, Brunhilde 1, had carried three astronauts around Neptune and demonstrated the viability of the Larkin Space Drive, at least to the extent that its full potential of 0.99 C could be employed on an interplanetary flight. The Brunhilde 2 would also carry three astronauts — this time, around Barnard's Star, 6.2 light-years from the sun.

Barnard's Star had been known to have a planet as long ago as 1963, its presence having been deduced from its gravitational effect on its sun. Many times the size of Jupiter, it was *ex officio* unfit for human habitation, but the presence of one planet (Larkin had argued in his successful jihad against

NASA's choice of Alpha Centauri) virtually guaranteed the presence of others, and one of them just *might* be the long-range answer to Earth's population dilemma.

Confident of his Drive, he had even impugned the necessity of a test flight, maintaining that Barnard's Star should be the Brunhilde 1's objective, not Neptune. But NASA would have no part of such foolhardiness. Even after the spacecraft's flawless performance, even after Larkin's aerospace company had built an even more sophisticated vehicle, NASA had still hung back, insisting on another test run around Neptune, plus probes and flybys of the extrapolated Barnard's Star system. More years would have gone by, years that Larkin couldn't afford to squander. He was in his 40s. He would be 60 by the time the mission was completed, even if it were undertaken at once. Desperate, he threatened to resign as prime contractor and to dissolve his company, and be damned to the lawsuits, if NASA continued to procrastinate. NASA gave in. They knew as well as he did that without his genius to guide it the New Space Program would go *Pfffffft!* like the Vanguard rocket.

The spaceship loomed almost directly above him now, a giant goddess out of the remote past. The downward flare of the lowermost stage became in his mind the flare of a Brobdingnagian skirt.

Soon, when the hold he'd put into

effect ended, the launch site would again swarm with technicians. Now, except for himself and the guards, there was no one about. NASA might be his Master, but as No. 1 Houseboy he'd carried sufficient weight to shut the machinery down. Long enough to say good-by.

Tomorrow, his beloved starship would be starborne. Starborne, and climbing swiftly toward the speed of light.

The idea for the Drive had come to him when he was a young man. It had come to him during the night, or so it seemed in retrospect. He had seen in his mind a sophisticated device analogous to a multifaceted reflector. A reflector that would slow approaching light-waves by throwing them back upon themselves, the amount of slowdown to be dependent upon the number of facets in operation. The retardation would be analogous to a wrench thrown into the machinery of the physical universe, and the universe would have to compensate for the resultant discrepancy by forcing the Drive and the spacecraft incorporating it toward the light source at a Velocity commensurate to the amount of retardation.

Theoretically, if approaching light-waves could be brought to a standstill, such a drive could attain C—the velocity of light. In practice, however, this did not prove to be true. The unknown cosmic force that co-operated in the first instance refused to co-oper-

ate in the second, and while Larkin's Space Drive, when perfected, had been able to attain 0.99 C, it was unable to equal C. It had yet another limitation. By its very nature, it was operable only in deep space, thus making a spacecraft employing it partially dependent on the very action-and-reaction systems it had otherwise transcended.

Ideas are for free, but there is a price tag on realizing them. Larkin had paid for his Drive. Dearly. With years of exhausting endeavor. With mental anguish. With celibacy. With the right to live by proxy through a son. With sleepless nights. Sometimes with despair. But he had got what he paid for. A practical pathway to the stars. Allowing for acceleration and deceleration, the forthcoming mission would consume a decade and a half, but owing to the Lorentz-FitzGerald contraction, less than three would pass for the astronauts on board. If Barnard's Star proved to have an Earth-type planet, uninhabited, or inhabited by beings inferior to man, colonization could be begun.

The night had grown cold. Dampness was creeping in from the sea. He turned up the collar of his jacket as he covered the remaining distance to the support pedestal. His heart seemed to be flattened against his ribs; there was a stricture in his throat. It was as though he were an astronaut on his way to keep a stellar rendezvous, instead of a tired businessman-engineer on his way to say good-by to the em-

bodiment of his Dream. A businessman-engineer denied the use of the wings he'd fashioned out of light, able to fly only by proxy to the stars he yearned to touch.

One time, when Larkin was visiting the clearing in the woods, a curious thing happened. A rabbit poked its long-eared head out of the dead leaves and broken twigs that the wind had heaped around the fallen star's base, then squirmed the rest of the way out into the daylight and hopped off into the underbrush.

A rabbit hole under a boulder was anything but unusual, but a rabbit hole under this particular boulder opened wide the door to a host of intriguing possibilities, the most fascinating of which was the chance that the alien pilot he'd postulated hadn't died of inanition or asphyxiation after all, but had escaped his spaceship-prison via a ventral hatch and dug his way to freedom.

Probably, during the years that had intervened since, the tunnel he'd dug had either partially caved in or had partially filled up with dead leaves and twigs. Whichever, it would have provided a made-to-order burrow for the rabbit Larkin had seen.

If the hole were to be enlarged, access to the ship's interior, or at least to the hatch (or lock) might be obtained.

At once, Larkin began to dig. With his hands at first, then, when the dead

leaves and twigs gave way to dirt, with a shovel that he went home and got out of the barn along with a flashlight from his father's pickup. He was no engineer (then), but he had sense enough to know that if he enlarged the hole too much he might bring the ship down on top of him; so, even in his soaring excitement, he confined the width of his tunnel to the width of his shoulders.

The rabbit hole (he persisted in thinking of it as such, even though he realized that the rabbit was probably only the most recent of a long line of diverse occupants) went down only a few feet, then leveled out. The digging became more and more difficult, especially after the narrowness of the tunnel precluded further use of the shovel and he had to go back to using his hands. Presently, his fingers began encountering bits and scraps of metal, and he knew he was on the right track.

As he dug, he pieced together what had probably happened, revising and embellishing some of his previous conjecture. Light-years from his native world, his ship disabled (possibly by a meteoroid,) the alien pilot had managed to reach the solar system and had come in for a landing on the only planet that offered him a chance to survive: Earth. Then, at the last moment, the controls had jammed and the ship had come down on its side, rendering its only hatch inoperable. (Or, perhaps, after landing upright, it had tipped over, with the same result.) Faced with even-

tual starvation and/or suffocation, he'd burned his way through the hatch with his ray gun and tunneled his way to the surface of the ground.

Maybe there'd been more than one alien. Maybe there'd been two or three. The ship was small, but maybe the aliens had been small too.

No, there'd been only one. And his proportions had been those of an average-sized man. Larkin saw this at once when he poked his head and shoulders through the jagged opening where the hatch had been and panned the interior with the beam of his flashlight. And apparently he'd never got out of the ship. Or, if he had, he'd crawled back inside to die. The fact of his death was indisputable. It was attested to by his bones.

Seen from the boarding walkway, the three Valkyrie stages seemed to taper down to the launch pad, lending the illusion that the third and smallest was largest, the first and largest, smallest.

A man standing on the pad would have seemed the size of a mouse. If there'd been a man standing there. There wasn't, of course. The hold Larkin had called had begun at 2300 hours, shortly after the spacecraft and the launch vehicle had been fueled. The second-shift pad-crew, scheduled to go off duty at 2400 hours, had been sent home an hour early. The hold would last until 0100 hours; then the third-shift crew would come on duty

one hour late, and countdown would be resumed. The three Barnard's Star Mission astronauts, Cleeves and Barnes and Wellman, would board the spacecraft at 0600 hours. The space buffs encamped along the perimeter of the complex would resume their vigil, and commercial-television coverage would grind back into gear. If all went well, lift-off would take place just before noon.

The floodlights blinded Larkin, and from his eyrie on the uncovered boarding walkway he could see neither to right nor to left. But there was nothing in either direction that he cared to see. "Mr. Larkin," an astute girl reporter had asked him during the press conference he'd held after the Brunhilde 1 spacecraft had returned from its successful orbit of Neptune, "what interests in life do you have other than advanced space-technology? And what do you plan to do after you've proved that your Space Drive is capable of carrying man to the stars?" "None," Larkin had answered. Then he had looked at her blankly. "I don't know."

The skeleton crew on duty at the Launch Control Center must have spotted him on their monitors by this time and had probably called the gate and demanded to know who he was. He'd neglected to apprise them of his visit. But he wasn't worried. Once his identity was established, nothing would be said.

He covered the remaining distance

to the lateral hatch of the command module, opened it, stepped inside and dogged it closed behind him.

He felt for and found the master switch and brought the interior to fluorescent life. He actuated the automatic atmosphere-control.

The command module (Cleeves and Barnes and Wellman called it the "Condor"; Larkin didn't) was far more commodious than those employed on the manned Apollo missions. It had had to be. In addition to the control room, there were partitioned-off living quarters and a small partitioned-off rec room that contained a microfilm library. The hydroponic vats were also screened off, as was the recycling unit. The onboard computer was incorporated in the control console, and the Larkin Space Drive was located in the nose, behind the transparent dust-particle deflector. The artificial-grav generator, which Larkin's aerospace company had perfected after the return of the Brunhilde 1, was encased in the hull. The provisions, medical supplies and spare equipment were stored in the service module.

A large viewscreen mounted on the control console supplemented the port and starboard windows.

In flight, the deck on which he was standing would become the aft bulkhead. Bolted to it beneath the movable control console were three acceleration couches, each equipped with a microphone, and an armrest that incorporated manual-override controls.

On an impulse, he went over and lay down on the nearest one.

After his initial horror had abated somewhat, young Larkin climbed the rest of the way into the alien ship and stood up. He'd been right about its landing on—or tipping over onto—its side. Just above his head an array of dials and gauges and rusted levers—unquestionably the components of a control panel—bore his conjecture out. So did the inner contour of the hull. But he'd been wrong about its being a regular ship. It was much, much too small. What it was, was an ejection capsule, or a lifeboat. The ship itself had probably plunged into the sun.

Located near the control panel was a small, cracked, television-like screen. The viewscope?

Obviously, the rock-like aspect of the outer hull resulted from a heat-resistant coating of some kind, for both the inner hull and the deck were made of steel, or, if not steel, an alloy that closely resembled it. To Larkin, standing on the hull, the deck appeared to be vertical. The propulsion unit, since it was nowhere else in evidence, was probably located underneath it.

He returned the beam of the flashlight to the skeleton. It still horrified him, and he had to force himself not to turn away. It lay beside the hatch, extending almost the full length—or rather, height—of the capsule/lifeboat. Larkin had seen pictures of skel-

etons and he'd seen a real one once at school. So far as he could tell, this one didn't differ noticeably from any of them. Rotted remnants of apparel still clung to the ribs, and leather-like fragments still clung to the metatarsal bones and the phalanges. There were dried animal droppings all around it, and in the rib cage there was a small pile of crumbled dead leaves, dried grass and bits of rotted cloth where an unknown precursor of the rabbit had nested long enough to bear and nurse a litter. It was the animal droppings, Larkin decided, that were responsible—or, at least partly responsible—for the miasmic smell that filled the place and that was making him sicker by the second.

The hatch that the alien astronaut had burned out lay next to his hip bone. Not far away lay the "ray gun" he'd burned it out with. A rotted hose connected the "ray gun" to a small cylindrical tank that in several places had rusted completely through.

Ever since boarding the alien craft, Larkin had become increasingly aware of how small and cramped it was. In a way, it was more like a spacesuit than an ejection capsule or a lifeboat. A spacesuit the wearer hadn't been able to get out of, that had negated its own purpose. A suit of armor analogous, but by no means identical, to those of the conquistadores. To the one Balboa had worn when he fought his way across the Isthmus of Panama and looked down at the Pacific, and all his men

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—

Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

How ironic it would have been if he *hadn't* been able to see the Pacific. If, like this Balboa, he had made the perilous journey only to have the armor that had been designed to protect him become his downfall!

Romanticism aside, Larkin knew he had made a tremendous discovery, a discovery that would jar the teeth of the scientific community, which still scorned the very idea of extraterrestrial life (this was way back in the 50s when little green men from Mars were popping out of flying saucers left and right, and Sunday newspaper supplement-writers were having a field day). But he knew also, standing beside the bones, the flashlight beam growing dimmer by the second, that what he had found was too precious to throw to the dogs and risk having it torn to pieces (he had never had a high regard for his fellow human beings, even when he was 10); that he would never breathe a word of it to anyone. Not even to his mother and father. *Especially* not to his mother and father. They were simple people, neither of whom had gone past eighth grade. Even if they were to see the skeleton with their own eyes, they would reject the idea that it was that of a being from the stars; moreover, they would be angry at him for even sug-

gesting such a possibility. Particularly his father. His father didn't like him to begin with. He was always calling him names. "You bastard you," his father would say. "Go fetch this, go fetch that!" His mother didn't care much for him either. All she cared about was watching TV.

His mother and father had been childhood sweethearts, but they weren't sweethearts any more. His father never talked to her and she never talked to him. When he wasn't planting or cultivating or harvesting, his father spent most of his time in the barn, while she spent most of hers huddled in her armchair, looking neither to right nor to left, staring straight before her at the television screen. But she never called him a bastard, like his father did. Curious one time as to why his father so frequently resorted to that particular epithet, and suspecting the truth, he dug their marriage certificate out of a dusty box in the attic one afternoon when they weren't home and compared its date to the date of his birth. Sure enough, his father had had to marry his mother. That didn't make him a real bastard, of course. But it made him a *de facto* one, which amounted to the same thing.

To cut down on the chances of any of the other kids discovering the true nature of the fallen star (none of them ever did), he rolled a log over the mouth of the tunnel, after he crawled back out, and scuffed leaves against it. The rabbit could still get in and out if it

wanted to, but it was unlikely anyone would notice its goings and comings and just as unlikely that they'd make the necessary connection if they did.

He visited the fallen star almost every day that summer, choosing a time when the other kids were off somewhere playing baseball or swimming in the creek. He was always careful to roll the log back in place before he left. He began thinking of the alien astronaut as Balboa. After a while, he started calling him that in his mind. "Balboa," who'd made it across the Isthmus, but who'd been unable to see the Pacific. Who'd surmounted the heights of Darien only to have his armor turn into his tomb.

"Mr. Larkin? Control Center here. Are you all right?"

He realized that the television camera incorporated in the control console was picking up his image and relaying it to the Launch Control monitors.

He reached up and turned the video knob to OFF.

"Mr. Larkin, we strongly suggest that you do not touch any of the other controls. The Brunhilde 2 is ready for launch, and any untoward action on your part may endanger the mission."

Busybodies! he thought. He knew more about the spacecraft than they ever would! He could take it apart and put it back together again.

The hell with them!

Defiantly, he ran his fingers over

the controls on the manual-override control-arm at his side. When he found the master switch, he moved it to ON position.

He reached up and pulled the control console closer to his chest.

Was this how it felt to be an astronaut? he wondered.

Was this how "Balboa" had felt?

He grinned. Ruefully. It had all been a summer daydream, he realized now. Sitting in the clearing gazing at the big egg-shaped boulder, he'd imagined seeing the rabbit, digging the tunnel, finding the bones. Like Alice, he'd gone down the rabbit hole, and on successive summer afternoons he'd gone down it again and again and again.

Or was it a daydream? He wasn't altogether certain. And probably he'd never really know. But the point was academic. Daydream or not, the summer of the fallen star had given him the direction he'd needed. Had spurred him, years later when his father kicked him out, to finish high school and to work his way through M.I.T. Had provided him with the impetus to found his aerospace company and to develop his Space Drive and to design and build the first starship. Had inspired a simple country boy to essay the heights of Darien and to give mankind the stars.

He realized with mild surprise that he had strapped himself onto the couch.

Now, without conscious volition,

he depressed the first-stage ignition button.

As he did so, the hereditary data encoded in his genes triggered a chain reaction in his brain, and he knew in a blinding burst of understanding who he really was, the real reason he had developed his Space Drive, the real reason he had built the starships, the real reason he had chosen Barnard's Star, and the real reason he had called the hold....

"Balboa" had got out of his "armor" after all. And had found a backward country girl through whom he *might* return by proxy to his native shore.

Despite the striking similarity of the human species to his own, he must have been aware of the awesome odds against such a union's bearing fruit. But it had been the only straw available, and he had grasped it.

Afterward, unaware that his victim would be too terrified to betray him, he had crawled back into his tomb to die.

Possibly he had been dying to begin with. Larkin would never know.

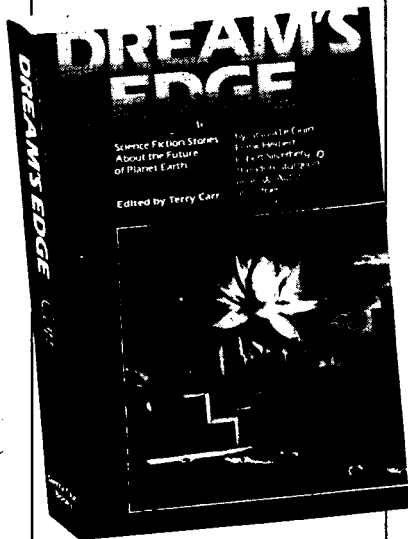
He did not need to.

The first-stage rockets ignited. He smiled, and uttered his final words on Earth:

"Control Center? Larkin speaking. I'm going Home!"

"We're coming to the edge of something—is it to be the death of our world, or an endless future?"

—Terry Carr



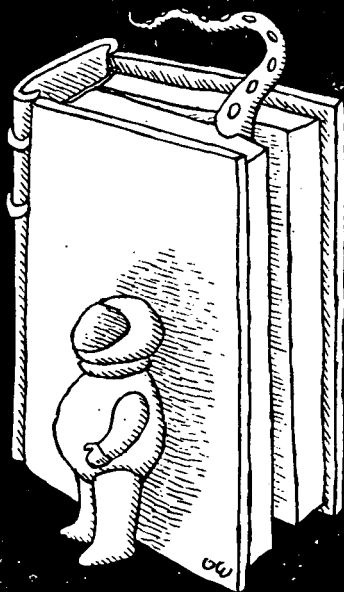
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The Green Gods by Nathalie and Charles Henneberg, DAW, \$1.75.

Many writers fear that we are living in one of the worst periods of SF book editors, with one or two possible exceptions. The major writers — Bradbury, Clarke, Asimov, Lem, Heinlein, LeGuin — have often had editors who are not known for their specialization in SF. The specialist editors, by contrast, are not major figures in the judging of fiction; they are known for their "acquaintance" with SF. That is how the publisher usually views them. For

the most part, these editors do not know SF in any historical sense; and if they are not exceptional in their judgment of *fiction* (an editor must be more than an intelligent reader), then why are they occupying editorial positions? The terrible state of SF publishing can only be explained by the artistic (not financial) contempt in which it must be held by publishers, because they permit acquisitions editors (trend-buyers), who are *presumed* to be in touch with the SF world through fandom and conventions (self-appointed credentials, these), to run the SF programs. Such an editor reads a book; he or she may dislike it; but the main question is whether this book is "right" for the market, or maybe even whether this author is "up and coming." These editors are guided by "talk," not by their own judgment. They are afraid to lead, to stimulate exploration; they want the safe and familiar. Every book is billed as "in the tradition of" some big name.

Adventurous SF publishing is still with us, at places like Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Macmillan, Avon, Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books (though here the compromises with commercialism may well prove Faustian). Paradoxically, the small presses like Phantasia, Grant, and a few others are doing a better job of reaching their audiences; they sell by mail in high-priced editions, but they offer real book production values for the money, while the usual hardcover product grows ever

shabbier, gets little or no advertising, and no editing to begin with.

The SF books at Macmillan and HBJ are guided by first rate, non-SF-specialty editors, whose main focus is on judging fiction; great amounts of money are not involved. Sadly, the SF world ignores this highly important influx of potentially influential works. Neglect takes the form of flippant dismissal and an almost complete absence of award nominations. These writers are too serious for fans and not serious enough for the literary establishment. This genuine alternative to "print television" SF is seen as dull, stuffy, slow — everything that you wanted to hate as a kid but were too afraid to admit it, for fear of showing your lack of taste; if it happens to live up to the standards of "that old stuff" (Wells, Stapledon, Wright, etc.), then maybe that kind of SF wasn't so good after all. Maybe there's a place for it at the university presses, where they love boring books. Yes, the "literature of ideas," as SF likes to call itself, is as anti-intellectual as television and movies. The pulps had considerably more intelligence and class; even our junk is terrible nowadays.

The most powerful tendency within the fan community, as well as among many writers, is not to complain about SF in public. A critic becomes an outsider as soon as he complains.

What we get is SF that fails to make us uncomfortable, that makes us feel good rather than thoughtful; SF that

hides from life, glossing over real and challenging problems, turning its back on the genuine areas of creativity within the sciences which might serve as springboards for a finer SF.

I bring all this up by way of asserting that the books I wish to discuss come from outside the gradually tightening mold of the above described milieu; they have slipped into our language because good editors see their virtues, they can be had for modest amounts of money, and because the cover of the SF label will give them a reasonable life. That they are respected by some sectors of the literary establishment merely insures that the SF establishment will look upon them with suspicion.

Tales of Pirx contains only about half the stories written in this cycle. The 1968 original contains nine stories; the Harcourt edition contains five of these. A promised second volume will contain the remaining four and the stories written after the first Polish edition. The same situation holds for *The Star Diaries* (Seabury, 1976); Harcourt promises to conclude the Polish edition in its own second volume.

The Pirx stories show us a young cadet who grows in maturity and complexity as he confronts ever more difficult problems; a recap, in effect, of the history of SF from the simple stories about wonders and future possibilities to the subtle, ambitious and problematical SF which we now expect

from our best writers. One volume cuts this scheme short, but the result is far from fatal. I expect, however, that the simpler stories of volume 1 will be more popular than those in volume-2.

The complete cycle of stories shows us that "hard" SF can develop depth not only in its technical side, but in the fictional, writerly virtues. There are no super heroes in this book, and no easy solutions. Writers who want to see how imaginative developments can be presented together with realism and truthfulness about human beings should read this book. It is this combination's possibility which is often denied by many writers. I am not referring to "having characterization" in an SF novel, but to having a depth of human reaction comparable to our finest works of literature. The only recent successes of this kind in English, where the writer enters the hearts and minds of his characters, are Benford's awesome *Timescape* and Turner's *Beloved Son*.

Lem also demonstrates that SF is not fantasy, that it is scarce and hard to do. In one view, SF is impossible to since it involves the certainty of being wrong about future possibilities, at least most of the time; but if we grant that success cannot be absolute, then it is the attitude behind the attempt at considering possibilities, and perhaps even claiming that they may one day happen, that makes a work SF rather than fantasy. Future possibilities may be glimpsed, often in small pieces, indirectly, but not known in complete detail.

Return From The Stars comes to us from 1961, from the period of *Solaris*. To say that it is about an astronaut who returns to an earth which has gone forward in time while he has aged only ten years, is to say that Beethoven's Sixth Symphony is about flowers, trees, and summer storms. Aside from the clever observations, the vivid human aches and perceptions, Lem has accomplished the difficult illusion of showing us a future world which may be distasteful to us, but which may be seen as quite legitimate and even desirable by its own people, and by us, if we were to change certain ways of seeing and understanding. Hal Bregg comes to accept his new world with some difficulty, after he has experienced it emotionally and aesthetically, but what may have happened is that a human being has given up to the inevitable and adapted. I'm not sure that Lem accepts this world, but he has avoided, if perhaps only partially, the easy trap of depicting a world we can all hate without understanding. (As a comparison, the best parts of Halderman's *The Forever War* are those in which the soldier comes home and tries to adjust.)

In its human details, as well as in its collision of two different moments of experience, *Return From The Stars* is easily one of the best conceived treatments of the theme. It has been predicted that it may well be Lem's most popular book with Western audiences. Lem's own view is that it re-

sembles conventional SF, and that his most popular books have always been those that do; he regrets any popularity which comes from sharing genre props and details, because he has tried to do more aspiring work, which has not been popular. But I think we can safely take the book away from him and read it for itself. Beethoven winced at the popularity of the so-called "Moonlight Sonata", feeling that it took attention away from his better works. Lem is so demanding of himself that he fails to see that there is a uniform level of quality in all his work, genre limits aside, and that makes all the difference. (*Pirx* is translated by Louis Iribarne, *Return From The Stars* by Barbara Marszal and Frank Simpson. Both translations are faithful and elegant).

Lem has now reached an all but unattainable position for an SF writer: he is recognized as one of the world's finest writers. Past scandals within SFWA scarcely affect his standing in the eyes of many genre critics; only the envious and second-rate seem to bear him ill will. I recently questioned a major, award winning writer, who replied that he thought Lem was very overrated; but when I asked what books he had read, this writer was hard pressed to name even two titles. He was completely ignorant of the fact that Lem's fiction includes both realistic and fantasy works, or that the body of work is so extensive, easily as large as Heinlein's and going back almost as

far; this same writer found it even more unbelievable that Lem is a very *funny* writer, a great humorist, in fact.

The list of Lem's admirers continues to grow, both in and outside the SF community. LeGuin, Benford, Sturgeon, Gold, Tuttle, Russ, Bishop, Vonnegut, and many others, pay him homage. The most recent convert outside the field is John Updike. His detractors within the field are (1) people who haven't read him (2) writers who have been angered by his criticism of their work (3) writers who are envious of his treatment and imagine that they should have it also (in some cases this may be justified, but it is no reason to blame Lem) (4) those insular types who presided over Lem's ouster from SFWA, and wouldn't admit they liked one of his books if it killed them (5) those who just can't read without preconceptions (Conrad's English was often thought a "quaint effort" by early critics), and those who naturally see foreign SF as crude, derivative, heavy handed and clumsy, when in fact it reflects a broader range of literary techniques. Commercial SF (there is so little of any other kind!) abounds in prejudices involving action, the use of viewpoint, the presentation of thought as opposed to feeling, etc. Yet I believe that SF is not inherently limited. Only the market and the lack of serious examples stops it from becoming what it should be, what it once was, in fact; the publication of even a dozen quality books still leaves them as the excep-

tion. Editors! Writers! Publishers! Look, listen, read! You may find that quality science fiction, seriously presented, may be the only thing that you *haven't tried*, with all your hype!

The resentment toward Lem among some of our most respected professionals seems quite virulent, even though it's quite clear that their fears are groundless. Lem is critical of SF, but no more so than Bester, Blish, Knight, and many others of our best critics. The fear of Lem seems to exist in the growing move toward a genuinely critical discussion of SF; whole careers may be subject to reassessment. Worst of all, an outside view now exists in the person of a major figure who is "not one of our people." The base of SF is being widened by the publication of all these books by foreigners; SF can only benefit and grow, as it acquires new traditions. This happened during the 1960's, with similar reactions from the rigid among us. The real expression of American domination of the world's SF is the fact that more American SF is published in foreign countries than we publish of foreign SF, but I have been told that this is simply a sign of our superiority and nothing more.

There are many signs that all this is changing, and that things may come out right in the end. It is even possible that future administrations of SFWA may recognize him with a Grand Master Nebula, as younger authors reach the seats of influence now held by the influential old guard. Lem's existence is

a happy fact for SF, however long it takes for us to see it.

The Macmillan line continues, growing to critical acclaim, with seven new titles as I write this, and there are tentative plans of adding some French titles to the list in the near future. At the head of the list are two new Strugatsky books, *The Ugly Swans*, and two short novels, *Far Rainbow & The Second Invasion From Mars*. *The Ugly Swans* has been compared to Clarke's *Childhood's End*, and I can report that it is deserved. The transformation of children in an unnamed town into superior beings who are critical of their parents' ways, is treated with considerable energy, economy, and provocative wit. (Translated by Alice Stone Nakhimovsky and Alexander Nakhimovsky.)

The Strugatsky brothers (Arkady is an astrophysicist and computer expert, Boris is a specialist in Japanese literature) often have fairly subtle satirical and critical components in their fiction, which leads me to suspect that SF in the Soviet Union is often a vehicle for criticism in the way that 1950's American SF was an island for satire and social commentary — but since it was SF, not many powerful people paid attention to it. *Far Rainbow & Second Invasion* are two very different stories, as were *Roadside Picnic & Tale of the Troika*. The first is a tragedy of high human disappointment on a utopian world; the second story is a humorous

fable with a devastating moral. Both of these works can make you cry, then laugh, think, see, fulfilling Bester's demand for a science fiction which can move us in the manner of great literature. (Translated by Antonina W. Bouis, and by Gary Kern.)

New Soviet Science Fiction is the sleeper anthology of the year. Although introduced by Sturgeon, it has no formal editor. The book is made up of stories by writers who have appeared with novels in the Macmillan series. There are stories by the charming Kirill Bulychev (who is actually Igor Mojeiko, a Lithuanian by birth), Dmitri Blienkin, Vladimir Savchenko, Emtsev & Parnov, and Vadim Shefner, among others. All these stories are of an even quality, which is to say that you will find none of the often cited clumsiness, bad translations, and the general unsympatico flavor which is still what is reported by the word of mouth filter through which people form their opinions of these books. A unique collection which easily surpasses previous selections of Soviet stories. (Translated by Helen Saltz Jacobson).

I can only second Algis Budrys's sensitive review in these pages of Savchenko's *Self-Discovery*. Coming from a writer and critic who has been hard on Eastern European SF, this notice was a model of receptiveness to another tradition, while at the same time speaking to an audience which is often shy of honest seriousness and perhaps needs to be prodded into enjoying

something thoughtful. Yes, using your brain can also be fun. As Woody Allen has said, "It's my second favorite organ."

Reading this book and trying to be critical of its strengths, I was surprised that somewhere deep inside me there still exists the notion that there is no great SF being written today that is not in English. It's an unreasoning thought, showing how much I am influenced by their example; yet I also know that there are many intelligent people who will simply be incapable of enjoying these stories and novels. The waters of the gold fish bowl saturate deeply, starting from the moment we feel homesick at summer camp! But like it or not, it's going to be a bigger fish bowl for SF, and those of us who pay more than lip service to being flexible must not be left behind.

You may well ask, what business does a Pole, Americanized to be sure, have recommending Soviet SF? My answer is that these works are very individual, skilled, and various. Yes, but don't Poles hate Russians? You can be sure, then, that if I push the stuff, it's good; and the same for that Free Lithuanian Citizen, Budrys. (*Self-Discovery* is translated by Antonina W. Bouis.)

Shefner's *The Unman & Kovrigin's Chronicles* are two short novels which further support my suspicion that SF is one of the relatively free areas in Soviet literature, probably because few think of looking for heresies there. The first is a funny story about a future simpleton

who manages to win out for all the wrong reasons; the second tale shows us a perfect society which the protagonist is determined to move off its static balance. Shefner is no Lem or Strugatsky, but his ability with striking images, and with humor, is undeniable.

Beliaev's *Professor Dowell's Head* is a slight but entertaining horror story, belonging to a long list of stories about severed heads. It succeeds in being vivid and unsilly (don't ask me how), even though it is dated. The power and zest of great pulp stories cannot be denied. Whenever I come across one, I feel that our junk today is neither stylish nor classy, or intelligent; there was better junk in the old days. Our intelligent junk seems limited to DR. WHO, and THE AVENGERS.

Peter Nicholls's SCIENCE FICTION ENCYCLOPEDIA lists Beliaev (Belyaev) as having dominated Soviet SF between the wars, and that his major influences were Wells and Verne. Often called "the father of Russian SF," he apparently used many technological ideas long before they reached American pulps. *The Amphibian* (1928, trans. 1959) is said to be the first use of the biological changing of a human into a water breather. Several of his stories have appeared in English. (*Professor Dowell's Head* is translated by Antonina W. Bouis.)

The Snail On the Slope by the Strugatskys was recently withdrawn by Bantam, because the blurb writer naturally assumed that the authors were in

disfavor with their government, despite the fact that the book's publication was authorized by the Soviet Copyright office. How could they not be in disfavor, given that the work is so satirical of Soviet ways? Darko Suvin points out in his excellent and informative long introduction that the book has appeared as a whole only in Estonian. It's a complex, puzzling, allegorical work, which seems more aimed at the limits of human nature than at any political system. Suvin quotes the authors: "The Forest is to be taken as symbol of the unknown and alien, a symbol of necessity simplified, of all that is at present hidden from mankind because of our incomplete scientific, philosophical and sociological knowledge." This is not one of the Strugatskys' more accessible works, but it shows them reaching beyond the state of their art, beyond what they call the "fiery banalities" of SF. The image of the institution, a closed bureaucracy, trying to govern the forest, is a haunting one. It's a novel to place next to Disch's *Camp Concentration*, and Lem's much more nihilistic *Memoirs Found In a Bathtub*.

Sturgeon's laudatory introductions to this series have been a source of amusement to some, but in fact he has praised a relatively small number of books. Macmillan's list is a credible selection of the best; there is no mystery about its high quality, since behind this

selection there stands, necessarily, a vast body of lesser work. The Macmillan line resembles more than anything the Gregg Press list, in quality and intent, except that Macmillan is more limited in the number of choices that it can make.

I would like to point out to collectors that these are handsomely made volumes (Macmillan and HBJ), given the current state of book manufacture; the jackets are striking efforts by Powers, in the Macmillan series. If the efforts of these two publishers should cease, these will become a collectors set, reminding us that a door was once opened into a whole other world of SF. I recommend these books to everyone, especially to young writers, who need to be shown differing examples at an early age, when they are still not set in their ways.

Quietly, without much fanfare, DAW has been responsible for quite a few books by foreign authors. These have included novels by Herbert W. Franke, Egon Friedell, Pierre Barbet, Gerard Klein, Paul Van Herck, the Strugatskys, and others. The latest of these is *The Green Gods*, translated from the French by the indefatigable C.J. Cherryh, from the 1961 publication. Anyone who liked Aldiss's *Hothouse* should like this novel of a future earth where human beings are reduced to insignificance by a riotous plant and animal world.

In which you are invited to join an uneasy alliance among a traditional sort of wizard, an incredibly depraved barbarian and a princess who talks like a frog, all in search of a mountain of gold.

A Hedge Against Alchemy

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

Kedrigern took his wizardly studies seriously, but he was a sensible man withal. On a beautiful morning in early spring he saw greater wisdom in sitting comfortably in his dooryard, soaking up the sunshine, than in conning ancient lore in his dim, cobwebby study.

He sprawled back in pillowed comfort, feet up on a cushion, and rang with languid gesture a little silver bell. From withindoors came the sound of sudden motion, and soon the slapping of huge feet on the flagstones. A small, hideous creature appeared at Kedrigern's side.

It was almost all head, and a very ugly head, too, with its bulging eyes and tangled brows and scarcity of forehead; with its great hook of nose, like a drinking horn covered with warts; with its ledge of chin and hairy ears like wide-flung shutters. Two great dir-

ty flat feet splayed at the ends of the creature's tiny legs, and great hands like sails jutted out from its sides. The top of its mottled, warty, scurfy head reached just to the level of Kedrigern's footstool, and there the creature shuddered to a halt, trembling with the eager will to serve.

"Ah, there you are," Kedrigern said mildly.

The creature wildly nodded its monstrous head, spraying saliva about in generous quantities, and said, "Yah! Yah!"

"Good fellow, Spot. Listen carefully; now."

"Yah! Yah!" said Spot, bouncing up and down excitedly.

"I will have, I think, a small mug of very cold ale. Bring the pitcher, in case my thirst is greater than I anticipate. And bring with it a morsel of cheese just of a size to cover the lid of the

pitcher, and a loaf of bread. And ask Princess if she'd care to join me."

"Yah! Yah!" said Spot, and wind-milled off about his duties.

Kedrigern looked after him affectionately. Trolls were a bad lot, it was true, but if one got them young and trained them properly, they could be devoted servants. Excellent mousers, as well. They were hopeless when it came to good table manners, but one could not have everything.

He settled back among the cushions, closed his eyes, and emitted a sigh of quiet pleasure. This was the life for a sensible man, he thought snugly. Not like your damned alchemy.

Kedrigern could not understand the fascination of alchemy. It was all the rage these days, everyone was talking it up, but to him it was nothing more than a lot of smoke and stink and a horrible mess and pompous jargon about things no one understood but everyone felt obliged to speak of with solemn authority. Yet it seemed to be catching on. The bright young people were not interested in traditional wizardry any more. It was alchemy or nothing for them.

Just one more sign of the times, he believed, and bad times they were, with barbarians sweeping in from the east and burning the churchmen, churchmen issuing anathemas and burning the alchemists, and alchemists burning everything they could lay their hands on in their wild desire to turn lead into gold. Smoke and howling and

destruction, that's all anyone cared about these days.

Except for Kedrigern, who was learning more and more about temporal magic and becoming rather good at it. He had reached into the future several times and established solid linkage with a specific time-point, though he was not quite certain just what point it was. He had even managed to pluck curious artifacts from that unformed age and retain them for study. There was much yet to learn, of course ... but there would be time for that ... much to learn....

Kedrigern fell into a light doze, awakening with a frown when a shadow fell upon him. He opened his eyes and saw a great hulking figure standing before him, blocking out the sun.

It took his eyes a moment to accustom themselves to the light, and his wits another moment to reconvene in the here-and-now, and then Kedrigern saw that the creature before him was a man of a kind he had hoped never to encounter.

He was twice the wizard's height and four times his bulk. Bare arms like the trunks of aged hornbeams hung from his beetling shoulders. Torso and thick legs were encased in coarse furs. A tiny head was centered between the bulging shoulders with no sign of a neck intervening. About him hung an effluvium of rancid animal fat and venerable perspiration. He was a barbarian, no doubt, and barbarians were no

friends of wizards. Or of anyone else, for that matter.

"This road to Silent Thunder Peak?" the barbarian asked. His voice was like a fall of stone deep within a cave.

"Yes, it is," Kedrigern said politely. He pointed to his left. "Just follow the uphill track. If you hurry, you can reach the peak by sunset. Marvelous view on a day like this. I'd offer you a drop of some cool refreshment but I'm —"

"You wizard?" the barbarian rumbled.

That was the sort of question one did not rush to answer. Far too many people were wandering about these days with the notion that slaying a wizard was somehow a deed of great merit. It was the churchmen put them up to that, Kedrigern knew. Churchmen never had a good word for anyone. Barbarians, alchemists, and wizards were condemned alike, in outbursts of chilling zeal and remarkably poor judgment. All the same, this specimen did not look like someone who took his orders from a holy man.

"Wizard?" Kedrigern asked, squinting up. "Do I understand that you're inquiring after the whereabouts of a wizard?"

"You wizard?" the barbarian asked once more, exactly as before.

An uneasiness came over Kedrigern. It was not at the barbarian's great size and ugliness, nor even at his sudden appearance here in this isolated re-

treat where Kedrigern had withdrawn from worldly affairs to concentrate on his studies and enjoy Princess' companionship. It was intangible, a sense of wrong presence. He had the eerie sensation that a member of his brotherhood was near, and that was manifestly absurd. This creature was no wizard.

"It's interesting that you should ask," said Kedrigern thoughtfully. "It suggests an inquiring turn of mind not immediately evident in your manner and appearance." As he spoke, he slipped his hand behind him to work the figures necessary to a spell for the deflection of edged weapons. "Most people expect a wizard to go about in a long robe covered with cabalistic symbols, and wear a conical cap, and have a long white beard flapping down around his knees. I, as you can see, am plainly dressed in good homespun tunic and trousers, wear no headgear of any kind, and am clean-shaven. Consequently, a casual passer-by might easily assume that I am some honest tradesman or artisan who has chosen to live apart from his fellows when I am in fact an adept in the rare and gentle arts." He hoped earnestly that this great brute would not decide to smash him flat with a club before he could proceed to a further protective spell. Even with the assistance of magic, it was difficult to be prepared for all contingencies when dealing with people such as this.

The barbarian's tiny black eyes, set

closely on either side of a shapeless smudge of nose, peered at Kedrigern from behind a fringe of lank, greasy hair. In those eyes shone no glimmer of understanding.

"You wizard?" he repeated.

"Me wizard," Kedrigern said resignedly. "Who you?"

"Me Buroc," said the barbarian, thumping his chest proudly.

"Oh, dear me," Kedrigern murmured.

Buroc was the barbarian's barbarian. He was known throughout the land as Buroc the Depraved and had added to his name such epithets as Flayer of God's Earth, Fist of Satan, and Torch of Judgment, as well as other titles emblematic of mayhem and savagery. It was said of Buroc that he had divided the human race into two parts: enemies and victims. Enemies he slew at once. Victims he slew when he had no further use for them. He recognized no third category.

Looking into that flat expressionless face crisscrossed with pale scars, Kedrigern believed all he had ever heard of Buroc. The barbarian's face reminded him of a cheap clay vessel shattered to bits and hastily glued together. The chief difference, in Kedrigern's estimation, was that the vessel of clay would radiate a higher spirituality.

"You come with Buroc," said the barbarian.

"Oh, I think not. The offer raises some unusual possibilities, but I'm

afraid murder, rape, and pillage aren't my line of work, Buroc. I'm more the bookish sort. And I'm not so nimble as I used to be. Thoughtful of you to ask, though. Now it might be best if you were running along," Kedrigern said as he hurried through a backup spell against indeterminate violence. With that done, he felt secure against any of Buroc's bloodthirsty caprices.

"Buroc find golden mountain. Need wizard."

"Oh?"

"Mountain of gold. Spell hide mountain. You break spell. Split forty-fourty," said Buroc in an outburst of eloquence.

"Fifty-fifty," Kedrigern corrected him.

Buroc's eyes glazed, and for a moment he seemed immobilized. Then he nodded his tiny head and repeated, "Fifty-fifty."

"Where is this golden mountain, Buroc?" Kedrigern asked, spacing his words and enunciating carefully.

Again the barbarian's eyes glazed over, and Kedrigern realized with a start that this was evidence of a reasoning process going on in the recesses of that little head. "You come. Me show."

"Is it far away?"

After a time, Buroc said, "Sun. Sun. Golden mountain."

"Three days from here, I take it. Not bad. Not bad at all," said Kedrigern, his interest growing.

This was a rare opportunity. It would set the alchemists on their ears

and put them in their proper place once and for all. Let them stink up the countryside with their furnaces and fill the peaceful silence with their babble of Philosopher's Egg and Emerald Table and such pseudo-magical rot in their feeble attempts to create a pinch of third-rate gold dust. Kedrigern, using only his magic, would possess a golden mountain. Well, half a golden mountain. Whatever the dangers, magical or physical, this was too good to let pass.

"You're not the ideal client, Buroc, nor are you my first choice as a partner. And I'm sure that somewhere in that miniature scone of yours lurks an inchoate notion of mincing me small once we've achieved our goal ... but I can't resist your offer," he said.

"You come?"

"I come."

At this moment Princess made her appearance, approaching on delicate and silent feet. She bore a silver tray on which stood a frosty pitcher, two gleaming silver mugs, a fist-sized chunk of golden cheese, and a loaf of pale brown bread. Seeing Buroc, she stopped abruptly.

Princess was a woman of spectacular beauty, with a tumble of glistening raven hair cascading to her hips, eyes the color of a midday August sky, and sculpture-perfect features. Her dress of emerald green clung to her slender form, and a circlet of gold ringed her brow. Buroc's eyes gleamed at the sight of her, with a light that betokened single-minded lust. She moved close to

Kedrigern and glanced at him, wide-eyed, in frightened appeal.

Inwardly, Kedrigern cursed Spot and promised the troll a sound thrashing at the earliest opportunity. He did not like the idea of Princess' being ogled by this brute, nor did he anticipate pleasant consequences from Buroc's all too patent interest. But what was done could not be undone, except at the cost of more magic than he could presently spare.

"No need to be nervous, Princess. This fellow and I have business," he said.

"Brereep," she replied softly.

"Lady talk funny," Buroc said.

"Spoken like a true connoisseur of linguistic elegance. Carp if you will, Buroc, I'm very fond of Princess," Kedrigern said, extending his hand to her. She set the tray down. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, and she blushed prettily. "I know that somewhere out in the ponds and marshes I was bound to find her. They couldn't *all* be enchanted princes. But I certainly wasn't going to go around kissing every toad I saw. Time-consuming, for one thing, and not my idea of a good time, for another. So I used my magic. About ninety-eight percent successful, I'd say. Princess has been a charming companion, and I'm very fond of her. Very fond, indeed."

"Brereep," Princess said, with a shy smile.

"Talk like frog," Buroc said, obviously disapproving.

Princess looked hurt. She pouted in a most fetching way. Kedrigern squeezed her hand and said, "Not that it's any of your business, Buroc, but we manage to communicate quite effectively. Don't we, Princess?"

She raised a hand to stroke his cheek and murmured, "Brereep."

"Sweet of you to say so," he responded. Turning to the barbarian, he said, "I think Princess, by her very presence, attests to my abilities. Now, do you have horses for us?"

"Lady come?"

Kedrigern weighed that for a moment. He could leave her here, protected by a spell. But if anything befell him, Princess would be alone and helpless, and unaware of her helplessness. That was unthinkable. Much as he disliked subjecting her to Buroc's hungry eyes, he felt it the better course.

"The lady comes," he said.

Buroc's eyes again glazed over in thought, then he lifted one columnar arm and pointed down the road. "Horses wait."

"We'll pack some food and be with you shortly," Kedrigern said. His glance lighted on the tray Princess had brought. "Meanwhile, be my guest. Eat. Drink," he said, presenting the tray.

Impressed by the speed with which bread, cheese, and ale vanished, Kedrigern decided to use Buroc in an experiment. Leaving Princess to pack the food for the journey, he filled a sack with objects captured in one of his

blind gropings into the future. They were small cylindrical things of bright metal wound in bands of colored paper marked with symbols and pictures. At first he had assumed that they were talismans of some unintelligible magic, but he had learned, quite by accident, that they were actually foodstuffs, protected by a near-impenetrable metal shell. He could not imagine how this had been done, or why, nor could he conceive of who, or what, would eat such things, or how they might go about it. If Buroc could manage to deal with the cylinders, that might explain something about them.

Kedrigern glanced about his study. It was cluttered with paraphernalia retrieved in the course of his temporal magic exercises, which had linked him with a remote future age. He had learned very little about that age so far, aside from the fact that it contained a great variety of mysterious metal objects and was very noisy. But his investigations were still in their infancy.

Outside, he pulled a metal cylinder from his bag and tossed it to Buroc. "Food, Buroc. Good. Eat," he said, rubbing his stomach in illustrative gesture.

Buroc bit down on the cylinder, frowned, and took it from his mouth. After staring at it for a time, he laid it on a stump, drew a huge, heavy dagger, and brought the blade down hard, splitting the object in two. He picked up one half, sucked at it, tossed it aside, and did the same with the other

half. "More," he said.

Kedrigern tossed him the sack, and Buroc treated himself to a dozen more, leaving the dooryard littered with glinting metal and shreds of colored paper. "Skin tough. Meat good," the barbarian said.

So that was how one enjoyed the contents of those metal cylinders. A dark thought came to Kedrigern. This remote age into which his magic had extended might be peopled by barbarians like Buroc. He pictured a landscape littered from horizon to horizon with shards of scrapped metal trodden by huge barbarian feet, and shuddered. Perhaps it was a sign that the alchemists would triumph in the end. That was the kind of world that would gladden their tiny hearts.

Buroc led the way to where two shaggy horses stood tethered, grazing complacently on the spring grass. He mounted the larger one, leaving the smaller for the wizard and the lady. Kedrigern mounted and reached down to swing Princess up before him. The saddle was quite roomy enough for the two of them.

They traveled in silence for some time. Kedrigern was absorbed in his troubled speculations, Princess was fascinated by the unfamiliar sights and sounds, and Buroc was completely occupied with keeping to the trail. The way led through open countryside for a time, across flowery meadows and down a fragrant woodland trail, then through a wide valley to the outskirts

of a cathedral town. Kedrigern, still deep in thought, grunted in surprise as Princess squeezed his waist tightly and clung to him.

The town was a grisly scene. Smoke hung in the air, rank and sickly-smelling, only now beginning to dissipate on a gentle breeze. Doorways and windows gaped, and the great cathedral was open to the skies. Above wheeled flights of crows, and Kedrigern saw a wolf start from their path. When he saw the first bodies, he raised his hand to caress Princess' head, buried in his shoulder, and worked a small concealing magic to hide the carnage from her. He could feel her trembling.

"It's all right now, Princess," he whispered. "We're out in a meadow covered with flowers. Daffodils, as far as the eye can see."

"Brereep," she said faintly, not moving her head.

Buroc reined his mount to a halt and made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the scene. "Buroc do all," he announced.

"Why?"

The barbarian turned his little eyes on the wizard, held his gaze for a long moment, then pointed to the ruins of the cathedral. "Me burn." Swinging his hand to indicate a heap of sprawled corpses, he said, "Me kill." Jerking his horse's head aside, he rode on, erect and proud in the saddle.

At the sound of Buroc's voice, Princess clung more tightly to Kedrigern. "Odd, how barbarians seem to have no

knowledge whatsoever of the nominative singular pronoun, Princess," he said by way of diversion. "It's always *me* this and *me* that, particularly when they're being boastful. Your typical barbarian's grasp of syntax seems to be on a par with his grasp of other people's rights to life and property."

"Brereep," Princess said softly.

"Well, yes, I know that your acquaintance with barbarians is slight, my dear. One would hardly expect a well-bred lady to mingle with the likes of Buroc, much less chat with him. You'll just have to take my word for it. I do, though, sometimes wonder if it's all an affectation."

"Brereep?"

"No, truly I do," Kedrigern said. He fell silent for a time, then smiled, then laughed softly to himself. "Can't you just picture them, off by themselves somewhere, hairy and rank, dropping all pretense and cutting loose with compound-complex sentences and sophisticated constructions in the subjunctive?"

She laughed at the suggestion, and from time to time, as they went on, she glanced at Buroc, then at Kedrigern, and the two of them smothered laughter as children do at a solemn ceremony. They passed no further scenes of devastation and Princess showed no further signs of fear.

Kedrigern relaxed somewhat in his concern for Princess, but he saw much

to cause him concern about other matters. He had traveled not at all in recent years, content to live on his quiet hillside with Princess and his magic and loyal Spot to wait on them. The world he saw now was a far worse place than the world he had forsaken. Nature was as lovely as ever; but where the hand of man had fallen, all was blight and death and ruin. The barbarians were overrunning everything. What little they left intact, the alchemists pounded, and boiled, and burned in their hunger for gold.

He became increasingly certain that the alchemists were going to triumph in the end. They would persist until they had turned every bit of lead into gold, and their work would precipitate an age of chaos. The future world that Kedrigern had reached with his magic might well be a place of horrors, if he read the indications correctly. It was a troubling prospect, and he sank into gloom.

Their journey was relatively quiet. They passed three villages which lay in ruins; and at each one, Buroc stopped to point out the carnage and destruction and loudly claim credit for it. He evidenced a growing attentiveness to Princess' reaction, and that disturbed Kedrigern. But at night, when they camped, the barbarian behaved himself. All the same, Kedrigern cast a protective spell around the tent which he and Princess shared.

They came on the third day to a sunless valley where nothing grew.

Carion birds watched with interest from the twisted white limbs of dead trees as the riders picked their way across this place of muck and stone toward a low hill that rose in its center. Only as they approached did Kedrigern determine that the bristling outline of the hill was not caused by the remains of a forest but by bare poles thrust into the ground at disturbing angles. He felt the tingling of magic in the air, and reined in his horse, calling sharply to Buroc.

"No further! That place is protected!"

Buroc jerked his horse to a halt and turned to face the wizard. "Golden mountain," he said.

Kedrigern was annoyed with himself. He should have known. There were few better ways to keep people far distant than to give a place the appearance of a burying ground of the Old Race. He dismounted, and cautioning Princess to stay behind with the restless horse, he walked closer. The sensation of enchantment grew.

With his back to Buroc, he reached into his tunic and drew out a silver disc about a hand's breadth in diameter which hung on a chain about his neck. It was the medallion of his brotherhood and contained great virtue. Running his first two fingers over certain of the symbols inscribed thereon, he raised the medallion to his eye and sighted through the tiny aperture at its center.

Before him rose a mound of gold. It was not a mountain, not even a fair-

sized hill. But it would do. It was pure, glittering gold, flooding the gloomy valley with its light.

Kedrigern slipped the medallion inside his tunic and rubbed his eyes wearily; using the aperture of true vision was a strain. When he looked again, the mound rose as before, like the trodden corpse of a giant hedgehog. He turned in time to see a flash of silver in Buroc's hand, which the barbarian quickly removed from before his eye and dropped inside his furs. Kedrigern recognized the silver object, and a chill went through him.

"How did you learn about the golden mountain, Buroc?" he asked off-handedly.

"Man tell Buroc."

"Freely and cheerfully, I'm sure. Did the man give you anything?"

The barbarian paused before replying, "Do magic. Buroc share gold."

"There's no hurry, Buroc. Did you take anything from this helpful man?"

"Do magic," Buroc said, and his voice was hard.

"Just now, I don't want gold. I want the silver medallion that's hanging around your filthy neck. You took it from a brother wizard."

The barbarian reached inside his fur tunic. He hesitated, then he withdrew his empty hand. "Wizard give to Buroc. Mine."

"No wizard gives away his medallion. You came upon a brother when his force was spent, and you killed him. That's how you found the golden

mountain. But you don't know how to penetrate the enchantment, and you never will." Kedrigern folded his arms and gazed scornfully up at the mounted barbarian. "So, you great greasy heap of ignorant boastful brutality, you can look until your greedy heart consumes itself, but you can never possess."

With an angry growl, Buroc dropped to the ground, drawing his long curving sword with smooth and practiced swiftness and charging at Kedrigern. The wizard stood his ground. The blade hummed down, then rebounded with the sharp crack of splintering crystal. Fragments of glinting steel spun through the air, and Buroc howled in pain and wrung his hands.

Kedrigern moved his lips silently, extending his hands before him. With a shout, he flung a bolt of shriveling force at the raging barbarian. It struck, and burst in a shower of light, and it was Kedrigern's turn to cry out and nurse his hands. But worse than the pain of rebounded magic was the shock of realization — the power that protected him from Buroc, protected the barbarian from him.

The medallion had a twofold purpose: to signify fellowship in the company of wizards, and to protect whoever wore it against unfriendly magic. It knew no loyalty but to its current wearer.

They faced one another, Kedrigern standing his ground, Buroc circling warily, each eager to strike but cau-

tious from the first shock. Buroc, snarling like a hungry dog, wrenched a jagged stone the size of a cauldron from the muddy ground. Raising it high overhead, he flung it squarely at the wizard's chest. It shattered into gravel and fell like hard rain around them.

"No use, Buroc. You can't hurt me."

The barbarian, panting as much with rage as with exertion, glared at him, motionless, eyes glazing in a furious attempt at thought. After a time, a malicious grin cut across his face.

"Buroc no hurt wizard. Wizard no hurt Buroc. No can hurt."

"I'll think of something."

"Wizard not hurt Buroc!" the barbarian repeated triumphantly.

"Don't gloat. You'll only make it worse for yourself."

With unnerving speed, Buroc turned and raced to Princess' side. He seized her wrist in one huge hand and clutched her hair with the other. "Buroc hurt lady!" he roared. "Wizard no hurt Buroc, and Buroc hurt lady!"

Kedrigern felt his stomach flutter at the thought of Princess in Buroc's hands. In desperation, he aimed a bolt at the barbarian's tiny head. The recoiling force staggered him, and he heard Buroc's laughter through a haze of pain. Princess' shriek brought him to his senses.

"I can't reach him, Princess!" he cried. "The medallion protects him, just as it protects me. I'm helpless!"

She turned her terrified eyes on him. Buroc forced her head around, to confront his ugly face.

One recourse remained. His magic was useless against the barbarian, but it would work on Princess. It was dangerous for anyone to be subjected a second time to shape-changing enchantment, but anything was better than ravishment and mutilation at Buroc's hands. She would understand, he was certain.

"Be brave, Princess. There's still a chance," he said. And shaking his head to clear it, Kedrigern began to recite the necessary words, spurred by the sight of Princess' vain struggle.

Buroc pulled her to him. She clawed at his face, and he struck her hands aside. She tore at his tunic, while he laughed and lifted her off her feet. Still she clawed at him. Then, with a bright flash, the silver medallion flew through the air.

Kedrigern broke off his spell to dash forward and snatch the medallion before it touched the ground. He dangled it by its broken chain, then swung it around his head, laughing aloud.

"Come, Buroc. Fetch," he said.

Buroc did not hesitate. He flung Princess aside and hurled himself at the wizard, clawing for the medallion. Kedrigern raised a hand, and Buroc froze in mid air, then crashed to the ground with a loud *splap* and a splash of mud. He was rigid as stone.

Kedrigern ran to Princess, raised her up and held her tightly in his arms,

speaking soft consoling words until she had stopped shaking. He led her, half carrying her, to the horse and drew from the saddlebag a heavy cloak, which he threw over her shoulders.

"You're a brave woman, Princess. And quicker with your wits than either of us. Buroc never knew what you were up to," he said appreciatively.

"Brereep?" she asked timidly.

He glanced at Buroc. Already, the clarity of his outline was fading and graying as the petrification spell did its work. Soon the Flayer of God's Earth would be no more than a curiously formed pile of stone. The general barbarity would, no doubt, continue; but Buroc's contribution would be missing.

"Quick and painless, Princess," said Kedrigern. "Better than he deserved, but under the circumstances I wanted something quick and dependable. Anything more appropriate would have required more time than either of us could spare." A glint of gold caught his eye. He stooped and took up the golden circlet, wiping it free of mud before placing it on her brows. "We'll leave with no more gold than we brought, if you have no objection, Princess."

"Brereep," she said decisively.

"I didn't think you would." He gestured vaguely toward the bristling gravemound. "We know how to get back, and I doubt that anyone will stumble on this and carry it off in the meantime. I'd like to give this whole affair some thought," he said, swinging

her up into the saddle.

He mounted Buroc's horse, and side by side they started back. He was silent for a time, deeply preoccupied, but when he became aware of her curious gaze on him, he explained himself.

"I might as well tell you now, Princess," he said, sighing, "that pile of gold is probably close to worthless. Well, maybe not completely worthless. Not just yet. But by the time we get all the wagons we need, and undo the enchantment that's been placed on it — a mighty powerful one — and get it all to a trustworthy buyer, it's sure to be too late. It's all these alchemists, you see. They're frauds, and charlatans, a pack of jargon-spouting pseudo-magicians, I know all that, but they're always *busy*, and there are so *many* of them...." He sighed again, and shook his head sadly. "They're bound to find what they're after. And once they can turn lead into gold, our golden mountain will be worthless. They'll turn all the lead in the world into gold. There'll be gold everywhere."

She laid her hand on his, to console him. He smiled bravely, but could not keep up a facade. Twice that day she heard him murmur, "All the lead into gold," and sigh, and say no more. At night, he said it in his sleep, and gnashed his teeth.

The second day he was silent. On

the third morning, he said, "It's not as if I sought it out. I mean, it was just handed to me, and to have it taken away before we even have a chance ... it isn't fair, Princess." He moped along for a time, then turned his mind to sending orders ahead to Spot. He wanted the house tidy and dinner ready for their return, and that required concentration. When instructing Spot, one had to be precise. Spot could not be left any margin for initiative. Telling him to prepare dinner meant *risking the sight of a heap of dead moles on one's platter*.

When they reached the foot of the trail to Silent Thunder Peak, Kedrigern, who had been leading his horse, gazing dejectedly on the ground, let out a sudden yell of exultation. He clapped his hands and shouted for joy. Princess, unable to resist his gaiety, laughed along with him, but looked at him in silent appeal.

"I've solved it, Princess! We'll beat those alchemists at their own game!" he cried, beaming. "Once they've turned all the lead into gold, lead will be rare and precious. So —" and he stopped to laugh and clap his hands and cut a caper on the path — "we'll turn the golden mountain into lead! It's a brilliant idea. Brilliant! Isn't it, my love?"

"Brereep," she said.



They had two questions for the survivor of the expedition: Why had he conditioned himself to forget all that he had seen on the alien soil, and what had happened to his wife and fellow explorer. They would not like the answers.

Taste Taste

BY
LARRY TRITTEN



Angelica saw it first. Her whisper woke me in the middle of a dream about the green hills and gray cities of Earth, the sound of her voice slipping softly into my dreaming mind to dissolve the images of sky and meadow, which fell apart like a drift of soft mind snow. I woke and sat up, opening my eyes on the kitchen whiteness of the chamber, that tedious whiteness that all astrovags come to know so well. Spacecraft should be designed to look as much like waiting rooms as possible, some UNASA psychologist had no doubt once said, and the agency had recognized the insight in the thought and acted on it. Now, moments after waking, the white bulkhead seemed almost luminous in its intensity. I shielded my eyes as if from the glare of a sun and sat there, reintegrating.

"Jack, come and look at this, take a

look at this ... do you hear me?" Angelica whispered. It was a soft caressing whisper, designed to lure me up immediately from suspension with its incipient sensuality, which it had done. "Yes," I said in response. "Yes, I'm up, I hear you."

"Jack, Jack...."

"Angelica," I greeted her a few moments later as I came up behind her in the "theater" where she was pulling duty while I slept. She turned sharply, then smiled and held out a hand, pulled me to her, kissed me, and we held each other for a while, warming the coldness of space. Then she pulled me over to the forescope and tapped the screen with a magenta fingernail. "What about this?" she said, indicating something that appeared on the scope as a mote of almost subliminal radiance. "It shouldn't be there," Angelica said.

Pale as it was, in a region of nothingness it was a primary sight.

"But it is, darling," I said. "And it's a sun, too, isn't it?" I added as I read the green print moving across the bottom of the information monitor.

"Bright, too. Extraordinary. What a find, Jack. I feel like Christmas morning."

"Umm," I said. But beyond my startlement, I shared her excitement.

"Well, I guess I have the privilege of naming it," Angelica said with clear pleasure and enthusiasm.

"Be my guest," I said.

"Well, I think I'll wait a bit. It has a planet. Maybe we can have a look. What do you think?"

"Maybe. I hope so." The thought of walking on a world so soon and unexpectedly was exhilarating. The experience of walking beneath an alien sky on alien earth for the first time was a miracle of rare delight; it was the one thing that kept us in the ice box, traveling through months of darkness.

Angelica took my hand in hers. "I thought you'd be sleeping for another week ... until we came to Stella Vista. But won't *this* be a trip?" She squeezed my hand, girlish in her excitement.

"Yep," I agreed. "If we can make fall." I tapped the information monitor. "Let's see."

The green data whispered across the screen, giving us all the specifics; we watched raptly, taking some of it down on note pads. Twenty minutes or so passed, and by the time we put it

all together it was virtually certain that we could make fall. Incredibly, the planet promised to be nearly as congenial atmospherically as Earth. Angelica and I were suitably astonished.

We spent the next few hours getting ready for the fall, and then we began the long swift journey down into the vortex, strapped into our pods, our hearts pounding and minds awhirl with anticipation, speculation, fancy. The ship fell swiftly down and circled halfway round the planet and then finally went in and settled with a series of groggy lurches onto the surface and became silent again except for the industrious murmuring of the computers on the control platform.

Angelica and I unstrapped. She was flushed and eager and she led me into the wardrobe alcove where she began putting on her thin blue walking suit without saying anything at all. I followed suit.

We elevated down through the ship and paused before the airlock door. It was Angelica's privilege and she smiled tensely as she opened the door and went through it. I followed her close behind.

I'm going to keep asking you the same question," Dr. Orange said. It sounded like a threat. He was beginning to bore me. I had nothing to tell him. But he kept asking the question persistently, aggressively. He had said he was trying to break down the black

wall in my mind. He had asked the question while I was hypnotized and while I was tranquilized and while I was sleeping. But I didn't have the answer. I didn't even care.

"Why did you take seven cubes of sominol and condition yourself to forget everything that happened to you after you went through the airlock door?" Orange asked.

I closed my eyes and exhaled a deep breath as I lay there on the couch. He was as merciless in his persistence as I was in my indifference. All that seemed relevant or important to me at the moment was my curiosity about what would be on the menu this evening in the hospital cafeteria.

"Why?" Orange repeated. "Why?"

I shook my head, grieved by the tedium. It seemed redundant to keep repeating that I didn't know the answer. So I said nothing. All I could remember was white space, the white color of the spaceship's bulkheads and the white color of clinical institutional walls, the ones here at the hospital as well as others elsewhere or elsewhen.

"What happened to Angelica?" Dr. Orange asked. It was a new question, one that caught me by surprise, and I glanced at him questioningly.

"Angelica who?"

"Your wife. Your fellow explorer. Where is she?"

I looked at the wall. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember," Dr. Orange parroted.

"I don't remember. I don't remember." As I spoke I opened and closed my hands in front of my face, noticing just then, for the first time, that there was something strange about them. Hands. They were awkward to use, I thought, as if I were learning the use of artificial limbs.

Dr. Orange watched me for a while in silence and then got up and walked around his desk and stood over me. "Do you want to remember?" he asked. "Aren't you curious, a bit, about why you felt it was necessary to scatter your memory like the pieces of a puzzle?"

I closed my eyes, feigning the thing called sleep. What an extraordinary sensation it was. The mind slips below the horizon of consciousness, and the body becomes completely vulnerable. How could a species that had developed such a dangerous biological habit possibly survive? I flexed my fingers with amusement.

Dr. Orange became solicitous. He could sense the change in me. "What is it?" he said.

"Nothing," I lied, easing back quickly behind the other's persona. I was wondering what "meat" tasted like, and what "tasted" was like.

Dr. Orange was watching me with an expression of suspicious puzzlement. "Well, I'll see you again in the morning," he said at last and then turned away. "We aren't, of course, finished...."

Back in my room, in the dark, in

the silence, I listened to the traffic of my body, the blood rushing and the heart pulsing, breath coming through the odd lips, subtle sounds coming from within the corpus. Then, after a while, a spark of apprehension. It was crowded in there; he was still there competing for identity. And, of course, I needed his help.

That night we dreamed of skies without light and dawns as black as ash and bone. I could remember things he could not, and was lonely for such memories: the wonderful gurgle and ooze of boggy terrain and joy of hot chemical rain and the dim heat of pale sunlight. A vision of Angelica, broken and dead, kept intruding. I didn't like it, but I yielded to it. But when mind-pictures of her living self appeared, I killed her again. That depressed us, and we slept soundly for the rest of the night.

I cannot respond to Dr. Orange's question. I don't have the answer. I don't know who Angelica is. I don't care about the question or about its answer. The enigma doesn't intrigue me. It doesn't involve me. What I would like to do is simply go for a walk in a park or along a shoreline and watch the world. I am not especially interested in people. People are all animated by motives, by personal concerns. Nature is spontaneous primal force, the quintessence of corporeality. I love to watch the air become mist and cloud and to watch the colors form where

corporeality begins. I love essence and substance. I love the sound in nature, but not the shrilling of people and the animals that are their kin as they incessantly articulate their motivation.

I was never married. I believe that Angelica is a *deus ex machina* produced by Dr. Orange to manipulate me toward a certain reaction.

Again, this morning, I was brought by an attendant through the pale corridor and into Dr. Orange's office.

"I don't know," I told him before he had a chance to ask the question.

"Oh, so?" He smiled. "Well, I think you do, Jack. Beneath the ice on the surface of your mind there is movement." His smile broadened. "What sort of bait shall I use today?"

"I'm hungry," I said.

Orange looked at me intently. "Really? I see that your appetite has been growing. You ate twice last night and wanted a snack later. When you came here you didn't want anything to eat. We thought it might be a problem."

"I've regained my appetite."

"Perhaps your memory will soon follow."

"No," I said, "I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Well..."

Dr. Orange was watching me with clever eyes. Something drifted through a depth in my mind. "I... well, I think it would be painful."

"It would be painful to you?" Dr. Orange said.

I turned a baffled gaze upon him.
"Who are you?" he asked me casually.

"Me." The word was small and distant, like an echo from a canyon.

Neither of us spoke for a minute or so, and then I said, "What's for supper?"

"Taste. Taste. Taste. Though we are imperfectly integrated so far, I find this tasting practice extraordinary. Matter is absorbed and turned into energy, but it is a gratifying process, a gladdening habit. This body is alive with receptors that luxuriate in the taste.

Taste.

I am the loneliest man in the world. But I am not alone. I know that I am another as well as me. My mind is not mine. Not even ours. My identity is something I must embrace in order to retain, but I am losing the motivation. I should talk to Dr. Orange about this, I feel, but I am dissuaded by some voiceless influence.

I am always hungry now.

Dr. Orange sat back in his chair and looked at me emotionlessly. The scientific look, I suppose.

"You are becoming more and more remote," he remarked.

"Don't care."

"You don't care?" he repeated, disappointed, shaking his head wearily.

"Don't."

One must be careful about what one eats. The paper the ice cream comes in cannot be eaten, is not good. The bone encased in the fiber is not good, although some soft bone can be eaten with care. Rinds and cores can be eaten but are, by custom, disdained. In any case, it is all delight. I am enthusiastic. I grow bigger as I imbibe.

The phone rang and Orange reached for it from the edge of sleep, involuntarily, for he was a doctor and sometimes his phone rang in the middle of the night. He greeted the caller with a sleepy hello. It was the head nurse on the night shift. "He won't stop asking for food, doctor, and he won't be quiet about it," she said. "We found him in the coffee room. He was eating coffee grounds out of the machine and breaking open those little plastic bags of ketchup and mustard and sugar and eating that. We sedated him and put him back to sleep."

"In the morning, then," Orange said. "I'll see him then."

"All right, Dr. Orange. Good night."

Taste. Taste. Taste. I have integrated now, jettisoned him. And am mouth. They have put me in a coma and the corpus is inanimate, but I am quite cognizant, looking out at them. And am mouth. Am mouth.

I will have bananas and pizza and bread and strawberries, and will have some dessert. Dessert. 

Here is a suspenseful and surprising story about a young intern and his addiction to a drug so strong and bizarre that it appears to send him across to an alternate world. Or does it? Mr. Shiner has sold sf stories to Galileo, mysteries to Mike Shayne and recently completed his first novel.

Stuff of Dreams

BY

LEWIS SHINER

If it gets to be too much," Matheson told me, "you can always bail out. Like this."

He clenched his fists and folded his arms in an X across his chest. With his white intern's smock and his unkempt wiry hair, he looked like he was getting ready to step out on the karate mat.

"You just cross your arms and duck your head and you'll come out of it. Sort of like a fetal position, only you're standing up. I don't know why it works, but it does."

"What do you mean," I asked, "'too much?'"

Matheson shrugged. "You've got to understand. This isn't just lights and colors we're talking about here. You're going across into a whole other world, even if it is inside your head. It gets more real every time you take the stuff. It's going to have its own people, own rules, everything. You may find

yourself in a situation you want out of, that's all. Hell, didn't you ever wish you could just turn off an acid trip?"

I nodded, looking at the small plastic pouch he'd given me. It was like a Tubex system, with five small doses of the drug and a steel plunger unit. Adonine, he'd called it.

"And you don't know anything about it?"

Matheson shook his head impatiently. We were in the middle of the hallway, right by the nurses' station, and I could understand why he was uncomfortable. "I sent a sample to Pharm-Chem last week," he said. "It was a stat order, so I should get the analysis in a couple more days. That should answer all your questions."

I was just making excuses and I knew it. It was time for my rounds,

**Technical assistance by John Swann of the University of Texas College of Pharmacy.*

and I didn't want to get caught in the middle of a drug deal either. So I handed Matheson a twenty and put the package in my coat pocket.

Matheson winked as he tucked the bill away. "You won't be sorry," he promised. "It's a real trip."

That night I went across for the first time.

I closed the blinds on the gently falling snow outside and sat on the edge of my bed. Everything I needed was laid out on the night table beside me, but I still hadn't made up my mind whether I was going to go through with it or not.

It was one thing for Matheson and another for me. Matheson wasn't afraid of drugs, had even used heroin off and on for several years. I'd used the usual chemicals in undergraduate school, and when I'd gotten into med school I'd sometimes taken speed in the morning and Valium at night. But never to the point of dependence, and I'd never liked using needles on myself.

But Matheson said this was special, and since Sarah had moved out it didn't make much difference anyway. I'd been losing interest in everything, and some kind of desperate measures were in order.

Even this.

The plunger assembly screwed together easily, and the plastic sheath popped off the needle with a little pressure from my thumbnail. I tied off with a piece of surgical tubing and

made a fist with my left hand. When I patted the inside of my elbow, the vein rose up fat and blue.

I swabbed the vein, and the touch of the alcohol made my whole arm go cold. When I held the assembly up to the light, the silvery drug seemed to roll in the syringe like a glob of mercury. I squeezed out the bubble of gas and watched the first drop roll down the shaft of the needle.

My arm was starting to go numb. I had to make up my mind. Setting my teeth, I put the needle into my arm.

I eased the plunger back a fraction with my thumb and watched purple ribbons of blood swirl into the silvery liquid. The sight of it nearly made me sick, but I pushed the plunger in all the way, just the same.

The city stretched out in front of me like a deserted movie set. Low white buildings, some with short towers and domes, spread across a broad plain and ran halfway up a nearby hill. Everything had an unfinished look, as if it had been built from sketches or rough cardboard models.

I turned slowly around. Behind me a path led into a sparse forest and disappeared. To either side a broad, deserted highway ran unbroken to the horizon. I was standing at the head of a walled footbridge that crossed about 20 feet above the highway.

I sniffed the air and tasted freshness, a clean smell like sun-dried clothes. I felt slightly high, but my

head was clear, and I knew I was having some kind of dream experience. It just didn't seem important at the time.

Nothing else moved. The highway was unused, the sidewalks were empty, even the pale blue-white sky was completely clear. On second look, it was obvious that no one had ever lived in the city, not in its present condition, anyway. What had seemed to be doors and windows were only recesses in the solid walls and didn't open into anything.

I reached out and touched the wall that edged the overpass. It gave a little under my hand, like styrofoam. I took a couple of tentative steps out onto the walkway, and it seemed to hold my weight well enough. On the other side, a narrow lane wandered down into the center of the city.

As I walked slowly down the street, I noticed how comfortable everything was. The feeling was like *deja vu*, but without any of the frightening overtones. I felt pretty sure I had dreamed something similar before, possibly even lived in a city like it when I was growing up. Whatever the reason, I seemed to know my way around already and knew what I was going to see around every corner.

I stumbled once, falling against the side of a building. The light cotton clothes I wore weren't even torn, but I did feel the impact in my shoulder. The vividness of it surprised me and I stopped and pinched myself, the way you're supposed to do in dreams. It

hurt, but nothing changed in the city around me. If the pain is real, I thought, maybe injury is real, too. Maybe that's what Matheson meant by "too much."

It seemed to me that I walked for at least three or four hours. Even though there wasn't anything to see, only the monotony of white buildings and narrow streets, I couldn't seem to get bored with it. I didn't get physically tired either, or hungry, or thirsty. My body seemed to run like a finely tuned machine.

Then, suddenly, it ended. A wave of dizziness hit me and I leaned against a wall to steady myself. While I watched, my hand turned transparent and I looked down to see my legs fading away. A moment later I was in my bed, exhausted and disoriented, but awake.

I lay there for a minute or two, eventually realizing that I was staring at my bedside clock. It took another little while for me to make sense of the hands and see that I'd only been across for an hour of objective time.

I got up for a glass of water, and after a couple of minutes I could tell that I wasn't about to go back to sleep. I took 30 milligrams of Dalmane, and after about half an hour I managed to drift off.

"Fantastic," I said to Matheson the next day. We were eating in the cafeteria, but I didn't have much appetite. The Dalmane, with its long half-life,

was keeping me relaxed, but I could still feel the excitement of the night before. "I mean, nothing really happened, but the sensations...just incredible."

Matheson's smile twitched. "Sure," he said. He was playing nervously with his silverware and his eyes were shot with red. "That's because this city of yours is like, well, a model of your subconscious. If you could take the inside of your head and build it in three-D, that's what it would look like. That's why you're so comfortable there."

"Where do you go? The same place?"

"No. For me it's something more...primitive. Somebody else could be on a beach or in a little town in Ohio. Somehow the stuff is tapping into your memories or dream centers or something like that."

"Where did you get it?"

"You remember a guy named Davis, intern, just transferred down to St. Mary's? He turned me on to it."

"Where did he get it?"

Matheson smiled that nervous smile again. It was starting to make me uncomfortable. "I guess he wouldn't mind my telling you. Davis introduced me to him down at the Pub one night. Calls himself Smith. Weird little guy, short and pudgy, lots of fat around his neck, kind of gray-brown skin. I don't know where the hell he comes from."

"Does he cook it up himself?"

"Who knows? He's the ultimate

source of all of it I've ever seen. Ask him about it yourself if you want to. He's there two or three times a week." Matheson's eyes were darting back and forth again, and the same piece of food had been pinned on his fork for two minutes.

"What about..." I struggled for the right word, "side effects?"

"Blake, you worry too much."

"That's not much of an answer."

"Okay, there's a little risk. There's a little risk in everything."

"What's the risk in this? Specifically."

Matheson shrugged, said, "Dependency," and looked at his food long enough to eat the bite on his fork. "But it's not the kind of big deal you want to make it out to be. If you want to stop, you can stop."

Right, I thought. How many junkies do I know that tell me they're not hooked?

"I had some trouble getting to sleep last night," I said. "You know, afterwards."

Matheson nodded. "Yeah, that happens. Just use some Valium or something. You'll be all right."

I couldn't place what it was about Matheson that was bothering me. But, then, I hadn't had enough sleep, and there was an edginess under the fatigue that might have been the Dalmane wearing off. It could have just been me.

* * *

The damp heat from the radiators gave the hospital an ancient, sour smell. One of the fluorescent tubes over the nurses' station was flickering, so fast that the irritating effect was almost subliminal. When I got up to make my rounds that afternoon, the corridors seemed like narrow, dirty tunnels. Even the faces of the nurses were sliding into a dreary anonymity. I made it through the afternoon somehow and got Matheson to cover for me in case I was needed that night.

Once I was back in the apartment the fatigue seemed to burn away. More sleep, I decided. If I took the drug earlier, I'd have more time to recover before going back to the hospital.

I ate a little, almost by reflex, and took a shower. Then I went to bed and put another dose of adonine in my vein.

The city was coming to life.

It hadn't made it all the way yet, but the buildings had grown real doors and windows, and I could sense movement behind them. The sky was a deeper blue, and for the first time I realized that there was no sun in it, just an unbroken dome of color.

There was a coolness in the air that I could taste but couldn't really feel, like springtime or early morning. Just outside the edge of my vision I could see blurs of motion and hear the rippling of conversations without words.

I walked downhill, toward the

center of town. None of the shadow people got within fifty feet of me, and the ones in the distance had the fuzziness of pictures taken with an unsteady hand. I could see they were wearing the same sort of loose clothes that I had on, but that was the only detail I could make out.

In the center of the valley the road split, one fork winding into the hills to my left and the other continuing on. A small, barren park had grown up in the center of the Y since the night before, complete with benches and leafless trees. The ground had the color of infield dirt on a baseball diamond, but was hard-packed and dry.

I sat down and closed my eyes, wondering what would happen if I fell asleep. A dream within a dream?

Sleep didn't come. So I experimented with controlling the dream itself. I tried to bring one of the people closer to me, just by concentrating, but it didn't work. Nothing happened when I tried to will changes in the buildings or the trees, either. The shape of the city was either coming right out of the drug, or from some unconscious level of my own mind.

My scientific curiosity didn't last long. Like anything else associated with the waking world, it seemed irrelevant in the city. I got up and started walking again, aware just below conscious thought that I was looking for something. I followed the branch of the road that led through the valley, looking at the buildings. I didn't pay

much attention to the blur of people on the streets, even though there seemed to be more of them every minute.

Individual houses out of the jumbled architecture looked familiar. The land on either side of the street rose as I got farther from the center of the city, and it was on one of these low hills that I saw a house I was sure I knew. It was two stories high, white as all the others, but with a square ledge between floors that ran all the way around the building. The slope leading up to it appeared rocky from a distance, but close up turned out to be made of the same hard, uniform substance as the ground in the park.

I sat down and waited without being sure why. After what seemed like half an hour a single figure detached itself from the crowd and climbed the long stairway up to the house.

It was a woman, and she was more nearly in focus than anyone I'd seen thus far. I'd never laid eyes on her before but she was as familiar as my own reflection. Her hair and eyes were a dusty tan, the color of the slope behind her. Her body was wide in the shoulders and hips, but her waist was narrow and her breasts were small.

She turned at the top of the steps and looked at me just long enough to let me know she'd seen me. Then she turned and went into the building.

I waited for her outside. Without drifting clouds or a moving sun I had no idea of how much time passed. When she came out again I followed.

She had the same elusive, flowing walk as the others in the city, and it was hard for me to keep up with her. More and more people were appearing on the sidewalk in ones and twos, and they were no longer staying out of my way. I had to weave around them, nearly breaking into a run to keep the woman in sight. Still she kept putting distance between us and finally disappeared when two people stepped out of a doorway as she passed.

She was gone without a trace, without an alley or a storefront to have ducked into. I circled the block twice, and when I was sure she was gone, I wandered back toward the park.

The sight of her had aroused something in me, something sexual, but also a deeper sort of longing that I couldn't really pin down. I sat on the bench, and before long things seemed to heel over sideways and I came back across.

Again the experience had only lasted an hour, even though the subjective time had been even longer than the night before. My body was limp with fatigue, and when I got up to take some Valium, the room did a slow roll.

I swallowed two five-mg tablets and went back to bed, but an hour later I was still awake. Things seemed fuzzy and distant, and I felt cranky as an exhausted child. I took 500 mg of Placidyl and left the problem of waking up for the next morning.

* * * *

Snow had been falling all night and the roads were buried in slush. Putting the chains on my tires turned into a contest of wills that I almost lost. I kept the heater of the little Volkswagen turned up all the way while I drove to the hospital, and I still couldn't get warm.

All through morning report I kept glancing over at Matheson. He was in bad shape, bleary-eyed and jittery, as if he'd been shooting amphetamine for a week. The chief of staff was presenting a case of tricyclic antidepressant overdose, and I was bored right through my exhaustion. My eyes kept wandering to Matheson, then to the yellowing walls, the scarred gray tile, and the peeling veneer of the conference table.

It was late afternoon before I found Matheson alone, and even then he was so distracted that I had to struggle to keep his attention. His behavior was irritating, but the residual Valium kept it from bothering me too badly. I finally got him to agree to slip away to the Pub for a few minutes. We got our coats, and both of us had them on and buttoned before the elevator stopped at the ground floor. I caught him looking at me.

"Hypothermia?" I asked.

He nodded. "I'm always running a fever when I come out of it. The next day I might get as low as 95."

The bar was on the other side of the street from the hospital, and we crossed in the middle of the block. Dark

gray mounds of snow were clotted on the edges of the sidewalks.

"How long have you been taking it?" I asked him.

"Week and a half."

"Every night?"

He looked at me strangely, then glanced away. He nodded.

The Pub was already crowded. Everybody from premeds at the university to senior residents hung out there, and the tables were packed tighter than boats full of refugees. I stood with Matheson at the bar and tried to shut out the throbbing voices and burning cigarette smoke. I was feeling nauseous, but ordered a beer anyway. Matheson didn't want anything.

I stared into the foaming yellow fluid for a minute, then blurted out, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I suppose I'm a little edgy, I guess. Yeah, edgy, why?"

"You look lousy, man. I think that drug is tearing you up."

"Hey, it's nothing. It's nothing. There's some rebound excitability, that's all."

He looked down at the bar, at his hands pounding out some strange rhythm, as if they didn't even belong to him. "Besides," he said. "It's worth it."

Suddenly he turned and stared at something across the room. "That's him," he said quietly. "Smith."

I followed Matheson's eyes and saw him in one of the booths. There was no

mistaking him. He was too dark for a Mediterranean, but he had a green-gray cast to his skin that I'd never seen in an African. His head was bullet-shaped, totally hairless, and his neck looked like an uneven stack of pancakes. His small, pudgy eyes seemed to roll back and forth between the people he was talking to, and there was something about him that I didn't like at all.

I turned back to Matheson. The noise and the damp smell of crowded humanity was getting to me. "I don't like this," I told him. "I'm getting out."

Matheson shrugged. "Do what you want."

I couldn't sleep.

I'd stayed at the hospital past midnight, determined to exhaust myself so I could sleep without using adonine. One good night's sleep, I was sure, would take care of the physical problems I'd been having and would prove that I could do without the drug.

I choked down half a sandwich and went to bed, but it was no good. I took 50 mg of Seconal, and another 50 half an hour later. My spine was humming like a power line, and I had to pull extra blankets down from the closet in order to get warm. The small noises of the apartment—creaking floors, whistling in the water pipes—made me jump uncontrollably.

I'd been constipated for two days, but that night my bowels turned to water.

I was a walking textbook of with-

drawal symptoms. After only two days on the drug. "Rebound excitability," Matheson had said. My ass.

The Seconal was making my stomach flutter, and the sheets felt like they were made out of sandpaper. I started telling myself all the things that people tell themselves in that kind of situation. Like how I was going to get myself some real help, that I was going to talk to Matheson and get off the stuff for good. First thing in the morning.

That was when I got the hypo kit out and loaded up another dose.

Cars had come to the city. They were red and blue and bright green, and from where I stood on the footbridge they looked like the toy cars I'd had as a kid.

For the longest time I just stood there, watching the cars slowly slipping under me, unable to see anyone inside them. For the first time that day my body temperature felt normal, my bowels didn't hurt, and my hands were lying still.

It was an acute physical pleasure just to be alive. On this side of the drug, anyway. I wondered how sick and screwed up I would have to get on the other side before it started leaking through.

Eventually I walked downtown to the park. The trees had grown uniform light-green leaves, and a carpet of yellowish grass had spread over the

ground. I sat on the same bench, searching each passing group of people for the woman but not finding her.

Everyone had faces this time, regular features that didn't belong to anyone I knew in the waking world. I felt I knew something about each of them just from the way they looked, a sense of how they would react if I spoke to them. Occasionally their eyes would flicker in my direction, then pass on.

Two men sat on a bench across from me and started playing some sort of card game. Instead of a standard four-suit deck, they were using cards with stylized paintings on the faces—chickens, rabbits, bears. I couldn't make any sense of the game, even to the point of knowing who would play next.

For the first time I felt a loss of control, a sense that something was going on that I didn't understand. It suddenly became clear to me that the city was reality for the people who lived in it. They were self-conscious entities, not just Disney robots there to put on a show for me.

The thought made me distinctly uncomfortable.

I got up and walked past the card players. One of them glanced up at me quickly, then went back to the game. He turned up a card with a dog on its face, and the animal seemed to have a sinister significance.

I stayed on the low road, headed for the house where I'd seen the

brown-haired woman. The streets were crowded, and this time the other people on the sidewalks were noticing me, stepping out of my way and changing directions to avoid me. It was as if I were becoming more real to them instead of the other way around.

There were no cars on the streets, and the entire level of technology in the city seemed lower than that of the highway that ran past it. I saw pushcarts, and even a sort of rickshaw, but no horses or mules. Or for that matter, birds, dogs, cats, or insects.

When I got to the woman's house I sat and waited again, but it was only a few moments before I saw her standing in the doorway. Her mouth was moving, trying to form words or maybe just wavering in and out of a smile. She made a curious gesture with her hand, twisting her wrist as she raised it, then quickly dropped it again. I got the meaning, though, and began climbing the steps toward her. She waited until I reached the top, then turned and went into the house.

The front room looked like a modern museum before the art was moved in. The walls were white and the windows were simply openings to the outside, without glass or shutters. The furniture was like everything else in the city—white and squared off, without ornament. The chairs were cubes of some porous material, and what must have been a couch or bed was just an oblong of the same stuff.

The woman motioned toward the

longer block and I sat down on it. It was softer than it looked, with a texture like very dense foam rubber. The woman sat at the other end of it, maybe two or three feet away. Her eyes were ringed in black, making them seem to leap out at me. Her nose was small and bent, like a tiny beak, and her lips were thin and sharply defined.

"Who are you?" I asked her. It was the first time I'd tried to say anything on the other side, and the words seemed to waver a little as they came out.

She shook her head at me, bouncing her short, tangled hair. Her mouth was working again, but she didn't smile. From somewhere out of sight she came up with a deck of the same cards that the men in the park had been using. She started to deal them out, and when I held up a hand to stop her, she ignored me.

"I don't understand this game," I told her. She shook her head again and finished dealing. The cards were laid out in the shape of a five-pointed star. She reached out and turned over the top card of one of the piles. The face of the card showed a snake's head.

She seemed to be waiting for something, and so I reached for one of the piles. She stopped my hand and held on to it. I felt a slow excitement building in my chest and thighs. I looked in-

to her face and saw no resistance. Leaning across the cards, I took her face in my other hand and kissed her.

Her mouth moved under mine with a sort of abstracted passion. I got up

and stood in front of her and tried to pull her into an embrace, but she rested her head against my chest. The feel of her was light and vaguely electric, as if a mild current were running across her skin.

I tried to turn her face toward me, but she pulled away and began gathering up the cards. When they were in one pile her hands seemed to swallow them. She touched my face and went back out the front door.

I lay down in the coolness of the room, remembering dark, snowy mornings, the grimness of the hospital, the squalor of my apartment, all with the detachment of someone looking at last night's dreams. When the images began, I was sure I was going back across to wake up again, but it didn't happen.

I lay there for what seemed like hours, then finally got up to walk the streets again. The subjective time I spent in the city was growing with every dose of the drug. When I finally did begin to fade, I felt like I'd spent a full day in the city. I didn't even sense the transition as I went back across. The adonine had cleared up the withdrawal symptoms, and the Seconal I'd already taken dropped me into a dreamless sleep.

"I got the analysis today," Matheson said. He didn't seem happy about it, but then he wasn't in any shape to be happy about anything. The orbits of his eyes looked bruised

and the skin on his hands was translucent. If he'd come into Emergency looking that way, they would have started feeding him intravenously on the spot.

We went into the conference room and shut the door. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and tossed me a few sheets of paper. They were the standard charts and graphs that Pharm-Chem always did—high pressure liquid chromatography, UV spectroscopy, and so on. I was shivering and depressed, and couldn't concentrate on the needle-like peaks on the paper.

"They separated out two fractions," Matheson said. "One proteinaceous, the other RNA."

"What does it all mean?" I asked.

"It's a virus," Matheson said.

"What?"

"A virus," he repeated. "A short-lived, noncontagious virus. The virions are small enough to cross the blood-brain barrier and hook on to some form of receptor in the brainstem. Then they shoot a load of RNA into the cells."

"Holy Christ," I said. I was picturing a drawing from one of my college textbooks, showing the virion crouched over a cell, long, spidery legs plugged into the receptor, its bulbous head bent down to the cell wall and its beak raping the cell, the coiled strands of RNA spurting out of it.

That was what I'd been doing to my brain.

"The narcotic effects," Matheson went on, "seem to come from the protein coat, which floats off into the cerebro-spinal fluid after the virus has shot its wad."

"What," I asked, fighting nausea, "does the RNA do when it gets in there?"

"They don't know. There was a note with the analysis, from the technician who ran the tests. He said they weren't set up to do any more, but he was interested and had kept out a sample to run some tests of his own."

"Something must have caught his attention."

"You're damn right it did. Thirty percent of the amino acids in the protein coat are optically backwards. On top of that, the nitrogens in what should have been the cytosine residues are in the wrong places. This shit is bizarre. It's like it came from another planet."

I had a sudden vision of Smith, his beady eyes and strange, oily skin. I was wearing long underwear and heavy clothes to fight the hypothermia, but I still felt a chill run straight through me.

"Matheson," I said. He had been about to walk away. "I—tried to do without it last night. I couldn't."

He nodded distractedly. "You've been across what, three times? It'll sort itself out. You'll get used to it. You want me to get you some more?"

His casual attitude put me off and I didn't answer him for a minute.

"Well?"

"All right," I said at last. "Get me some more."

I left the ward at 10:30 that night. I was in no shape to deal with patients, but I'd muddled through the day somehow. I had only enough concentration to take care of what was directly in front of me, and the world had closed down to the moment and the area of space I was occupying. The feeling of dirtiness around me had gotten worse, and even while part of my brain was trying to tell me it wasn't real, the rest of my mind was recoiling from it. I could barely remember what happened when I took the drug; all I had was the vague knowledge that when the day was over I would take it again.

I'd left the heater blazing all day and the apartment was like a sauna. I didn't even bother to eat anything since I would have lost it to the diarrhea anyway. After showering I wiped the thick steam off the bathroom mirror and looked at myself.

I was in nearly as bad a shape as Matheson. Loose skin hung off the washboard of my ribcage. My elbows and knees looked swollen compared to the arms and legs they clung to. My face was as dull and expressionless as a wooden mask.

I toweled off and got into bed. The empty syringe from the night before was still lying on the bedside table. I stared at it for a long time before fitting a new unit dose into the holder. Then I swallowed two of the 50-mg Seconals

so I wouldn't wake up when the drug wore off.

The red-brown beginnings of a bruise discolored the inside of my elbow where I'd done a bad job the night before. I had to tie off my other arm and give myself the shot left-handed.

Virus, I thought, as I watched the blood mixing with the thick, metallic drug. A wave of nausea went over me, and my right hand clenched the sheets up into a knot. I pushed the plunger home.

It was like waking up from a bout with the flu to find my fever broken and the sun shining. I stood at the end of the footbridge and breathed the sweet-smelling air that blew out of the trees. The miseries of the day seemed to seep out of me and right on into space. I remembered everything that had happened, right up to the needle sliding into my arm, and it all seemed clearer to me than when it had actually been going on.

But that was another world. I couldn't even think of it as the real world, not any more.

Instead of going into the city, I turned and followed the dirt road into the trees. Dry, summery-looking leaves had sprung out everywhere. Once it was out of sight of the city, the road turned parallel to the highway and led downhill. A few hundred yards along it I came to a shallow, clear

stream. Trees ran along both banks, and rocks arched the river into spray and foam. It was right where I'd known it would be, and I got out of my clothes and waded into it.

The woman appeared from somewhere in the trees and sat on the bank watching me. I tried to get her to join me, but she didn't seem to understand what I wanted. Finally I got out of the water and lay on the bank beside her. She touched my stomach and her fingers gave me that strange, tingling sensation again. I pulled her down to kiss her, but after a moment she eased back and lay down a little further away. An alieness about her kept me from pursuing her, even though I was aroused and wanted her.

"Can you understand me today?" I asked her. My voice sounded clearer to me, but still wasn't coming through for her. She shook her head.

It felt like a long summer afternoon that we spent there by the river. Sometimes she would sketch stylized figures in the dirt; sometimes I would go back in the water and swim. Then, without any kind of warning, she got to her feet and walked away. I dressed and followed her, but she was still faster than I was, and she had disappeared by the time I reached the overpass.

It didn't seem to matter. I went back to the park and sat for a while on the bench. As I sat there, relaxed, staring into the empty sky, I realized that the time I spent in the city was now the only time I had to think things out. If

any intelligent decisions were to be made, it had to be then and there.

The first decision I had to make was whether or not I was willing to give the stuff up.

After that came the question of whether or not I would be able to.

I was still trying to sort it all out when a sudden flash of movement caught my eye. Someone had just ducked into a side street, and the motion riveted my attention. City people didn't move that way.

I got up and ran to the alley for a look. The people I passed almost seemed to resent my moving so quickly, turning to stare at me with narrowed eyes. I ignored them and turned the corner just in time to see a heavysset figure disappearing around the next block.

I would have known him anywhere. It was the man Matheson called Smith.

I ran after him. When I rounded the corner I saw him knocking at one of the doors that faced the street. He was looking around anxiously, and I ducked back out of sight. When I leaned out for another look, he was gone.

I moved to the window of the building and peeked inside. Like all the windows in the city, it was just an open place in the wall, and I found myself staring right at Smith's back. In the shadows beyond him stood one of the city's people, dressed in the usual light pants and shirt. There was a look of eagerness on his face that I'd never seen

in any of them before. He was concentrating on something in Smith's hand, and I craned my neck for a better view of it.

It was a plastic pouch of adonine.

At that instant the city man raised his eyes and saw me, and Smith followed the direction of his gaze. He turned his bulk around to face me and focused his flat, piggish stare on me.

I looked from Smith to the adonine, my mind filling with questions. But it was too late for answers. I could already feel the tingling in my legs that meant the drug was wearing off. I tried to fight it, but the force pulling me back was too strong. In a moment I had faded completely away.

Matheson didn't show up for morning report. I was groggy from the Sectional, but I'd taken a Valium anyway to try and take the edge off my nerves. It had made me calmer, but it hadn't helped the fuzziness in my brain. I couldn't seem to shake the delusion that I was working in a decaying zoo, not a hospital. Why doesn't somebody clean the cages? I kept wondering.

If it kept up I was going to need something stronger than Valium. Thorazine, maybe.

No, I told myself. Not Thorazine. I'm not crazy.

Between the withdrawal symptoms and worry over Matheson I was a wreck by the end of morning report.

"Blake."

It was my name. The sound of it had startled me so badly my leg had jumped into the table. If it hadn't been for the Valium, I would probably have gone completely to pieces.

"Yes?" I said.

"Stay here a minute," the chief resident told me. "I want to talk to you."

Christ, I thought. He *knows*. They all must know.

"You look terrible, doctor," he said. "What's wrong with you?" He had a face like a kindly old GP, but it seemed to me like he was smiling with some sort of secret pleasure.

"Ocelots..." I said. It came out as a mumble, but I was terrified by the loss of control.

"What?"

I cleared my throat and tried again. "I'm not...sleeping too well, that's all. Nothing else. Nothing wrong."

"I've heard you've had some personal problems lately," he said. Was he talking about Sarah? Or something else? What was he after?

"Some, sir," I said. "Nothing I can't handle."

"All right," he said. "I'll take your word for it. But we can't have our doctors running around here looking worse than the patients. Start taking care of yourself, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Blake?"

"Yes, sir?" He had caught me just as I was turning and I had to casually reach for the table to steady myself.

"Do you know anything about

Matheson? He's still not here, and no one's heard from him at the desk."

I tried to concentrate on his eyes, tried to keep the parts of my body still. "No, sir," I said. "I don't know anything about it."

He was wearing a strange look, and I knew he hadn't believed me. He was after something, I was sure of it, but I didn't know what it was.

"All right, Blake," he said. "That'll be all."

Matheson didn't answer his phone when I tried his apartment. I kept at it all morning, and when lunch break came I went looking for him.

Driving was bad. My concentration was even worse than the day before. From second to second I had to fight to remember where I was, what I was doing. I had the car heater on full, and it still wasn't enough. I imagined I could feel tiny drafts blowing in from the edges of the windshield and doors. Traffic was heavy, and I might have made better time on foot, but I couldn't face leaving the warmth of the car. When gaps formed in front of me, I accelerated too hard, and twice I nearly went off onto the sidewalk.

I finally skidded into a parking place next to Matheson's car. Before I knew what I was doing, I had the door open and was searching the glove compartment for adonine. I didn't find any. So I slammed the car door and ran up the stairs. The effort left me exhausted and shaking in front of his

door. I pounded on it and rang the bell, and when nobody answered I pried the ancient lock open with my pocketknife.

Except for a few details I could have been looking at my own apartment. It seemed unbelievably filthy to me. A narrow bed sagged at one end of the room, and a hot plate sat on top of a small icebox at the other. The walls were covered by tilting bookshelves, and a closet was stuffed with dirty clothes. The area around the bed was littered with empty adonine cartridges.

The covers were heaped on the mattress, and the refrigerator was full of food, but Matheson was gone. And if he had any adonine in the apartment, it was gone too.

I went back for another look at the bed, pulling the blankets onto the floor. There, laid out between the sheets, was a pair of heavy wool pajamas, just as if the body that had been in them had vanished into the air. Tied loosely around one of the arms was a piece of surgical tubing.

No one on the ward had any idea where Matheson could be. I called St. Mary's long distance to find Davis, the only other user I knew. No one had heard of him.

With Matheson gone I had to stay on the ward all night. I never had a chance to get to the Pub and look for Smith, which meant no chance to get any more of the drug.

I was down to my last dose, and every time I thought about it, I started to panic all over again.

I came across that night gasping like a drowning man. I dropped to my knees and leaned my head against the cool stone of the overpass.

It was a relief to be able to think again. I remembered pieces of the day—Matheson's disappearance, the confrontation after morning report—and it seemed incredible to me that I'd managed to get through the day at all. Then I dismissed it, the way I would a bad nightmare, and went on to other things.

What bothered me most was seeing Smith in the city. It was the first time I had seen anyone from the waking universe on this side. If it had been Matheson, or my parents, or Sarah, it might have made sense. But, seeing Smith, I had the eerie premonition that he wasn't there because of any associations I'd had with him in the other world. I was sure that he was somehow part of the drug, part of the information carried by the RNA.

I had to know for sure. I walked into town to look for him.

I could sense a new feeling on the streets. For no specific reason I felt like I had become the center of attention everywhere I went. People seemed to be talking behind me as I walked by, and there was a murmur following me that sounded openly hostile.

The house where I'd seen Smith my

last time across was deserted. I cut through the center of town to the woman's house, but it was empty too. Even the furniture was gone.

Back in the park I stood under a tree and watched the people moving by me. The streets were crowded now, and I could hardly walk without running into people. Whenever I touched any of them I felt the mild charge of contact, the way I had with the woman. Anyone I touched pulled away from me and turned to whisper to someone else.

After a few minutes I got tired of waiting and went out of the streets again. I don't know how long I'd been walking when I saw him, but he almost seemed to have been waiting for me. He was lounging against the wall of a building, apparently alone, and when I got within a block of him, he began to walk away. He didn't make any sign that he'd seen me, but I was sure he had. He stayed a block in front of me, sometimes seeming to want to look back at me, but never quite going through with it. When I picked up the pace a little, so did he, not even bothering to look back.

We'd been walking away from the center of town, at first, in the general direction of the woman's house. Then he'd turned right to return to the main avenue, and right again, taking us back the opposite way.

By the time we passed the park I sensed that something was happening. Fewer people were on the sidewalks

ahead of us, and a constant murmur came from behind. I stopped, and ahead of me Smith leaned against a wall and waited. I started toward him, then turned in the middle of a step.

Thirty or forty of the citizens were following me. They all wore loose white clothing, all had fair hair and pale skin. An intensity about their faces frightened me. When I turned on them they stopped where they were, casually, and started talking among themselves. I couldn't hear their voices, but their eyes were still fixed on me. When I took a step toward them they held their ground, and when I backed away they moved slowly after me.

I turned and ran for Smith, but he was more agile than he looked and darted away down the block. I chased hard after him and heard the footsteps of the crowd following me.

We were almost to the footbridge over the highway. Smith stumbled with exhaustion and collapsed against a concrete retaining wall, his back to me. I slowed to a walk and stopped just behind him.

"Smith?" I said. "Turn around."

He ignored me. I started to reach for him when something ominous in the noise of the crowd made me look back.

They were coming for me, like an army of zombies out of a horror film. Their flat, neutral eyes were locked on me, and they were shuffling forward with a deliberation that terrified me. I

backed away from them instinctively, moving out onto the footbridge. They were only a few yards away when I heard another noise behind me and turned to see a second army of them coming out of the woods.

I suddenly knew what Matheson had been talking about. All my desire for answers went away, and the only thing I wanted was to be out of there.

I crossed my arms over my chest, ducked my chin, and squeezed my eyes shut.

When I opened them I was fading away and the crowd was dimming into blackness.

I came to in my bed, burning with fever. My skin was hot and tight, and my throat was cracking like a dry river bottom. I sat up, wanting to get up for water, but I never made it. Sleep fell on me like a warm avalanche.

The detail man from Sandoz had a card table set up outside the Emergency Room, giving away coffee and donuts. He was pushing Hydergine, which was supposed to help you if you were senile. That wasn't my problem. I asked him for some Mellaril samples, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. He got a narrow box out of his case and gave me a strip of ten-unit doses.

The tablets were light green, 100 mg, intended for advanced psychotics. I wasn't crazy, I knew that, but the symptoms were similar. Only the Sec-
onal that was still in my system kept

me calm enough to deal with the razor-cut drug rep in his three-piece suit. As soon as I was out of his sight, I tore open one of the blister packs and swallowed the pill dry.

By eight o'clock I was relaxed, and the visions of dirt and decay had started to recede. I managed a vaguely coherent presentation and even got through morning rounds without any real trouble.

I called Matheson's apartment twice during the morning, with no answer. I hadn't really expected any. I fought to keep myself from thinking about the fact that I was completely out of adonine.

By lunchtime I couldn't think about anything else: I took another hundred milligrams of Mellaril and washed it down with hot coffee.

In the quiet hours of the afternoon I went through Matheson's locker in the conference room. When I didn't find anything I started pulling out his books and papers and dumping them on the floor, searching frantically for even a single dose of the drug.

"What are you doing?"

I whirled around to see a look of horror on the face of the charge nurse. I had a dreamlike vision of myself—red, swollen eyes, hollow cheeks, shaking hands and chattering teeth.

I ignored her, scooping the papers back into the locker and slamming the door on them. I pushed past her into the hallway and tried to keep from breaking into a run as I headed for the

cafeteria. Sweat was running off of me, but I felt like there was ice in my stomach and I needed to pour something hot onto it.

That afternoon I saw a letter for Matheson in his box. It had a Pharm-Chem return address on it, and so I slipped it in my pocket. The first chance I had I took it into the men's room and tore it open.

It was from the chemist who had done the first analysis. He'd been feeding the rest of the adonine to rats, and he hadn't been ready for the results he'd gotten.

"I'm certain," he wrote, "that this drug is forcing reticular formation cells to make a reverse transcriptase. The fraction of rat brain homogenate from the reticular activating system contained not only the viral DNA, but a large quantity of radically altered DNA."

RNA was supposed to make protein. But if what the chemist was saying was true, this RNA was turning around and building new, abnormal DNA, and god only knew what that new DNA was doing to the cells of my brain, or what effect it was having on my perceptions.

"It is recommended in the strongest possible terms that you *do not* administer this substance to human subjects. As well as taking control of cellular metabolism, the drug is found to have an *extremely high* addiction liability."

So what else is new? I thought. I

crumpled the letter and flushed it away.

At six o'clock I was pushing my way through the happy-hour crowd at the Pub, looking for Smith. I had to shout at the bartender to get him to hear me, and when I finished the description, he said he had no idea of who I was talking about. He gave me some coffee, but I couldn't swallow more than a sip of it. When I set the cup down on the bar, a kid was standing next to me.

"I've seen him," the kid said.

"Where?"

"In here sometimes. He was in here last night, talking to a friend of mine. I think he said he'd be back here tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow?" It was like a cold fist in the gut.

"That's what he said."

I walked away from him and went back out into the snow.

I kept it up as long as I could, working in a radius out from the hospital that took in every bar, restaurant and pizza joint in the circle. But before long the cold was just too much for me, leaving me shaking so badly I couldn't even walk. I drove back home through the thick, drifting flakes of snow, thinking about a city where there was no winter.

I took three more Mellarils and sat shivering under my blankets, waiting

for them to work. The ticking of the snow against the windowpane took forever to fade, but sometime around dawn I finally dozed off.

I dreamed of the city, but I wasn't really there. It was like watching it through a glass-bottomed boat, or through a plastic bubble that I could press myself against and almost put my hand through, but not quite. It was as much comfort to me as a photograph of a lost girlfriend.

I called in sick the next morning and lay in bed, dazed from the drugs, shattered by a sense of emptiness and loss. Sometime in the afternoon I stumbled out of bed and dressed in the dim light reflected from the snow outside.

Even over long underwear and another layer of clothes, my shirt and pants hung loosely on me. My joints creaked when I moved, and my face belonged in Dachau.

I had to drive to the Pub, I couldn't walk it in that awful cold, but it was a close thing. I finally staggered in, sat in a back booth, and ordered coffee. I washed down a Mellaril with the first cup and sat back to wait.

I waited an endless time, a longer time than I was able to keep track of. When my cup was empty someone filled it, and I sipped at it again until it was dry.

With my coat and gloves on, sitting still, I was all right, but the world seemed to come and go. I couldn't

remember the last time I'd eaten anything.

When Smith finally came in, I was nearly delirious, unable to tell if I was seeing him in a waking reality of in another drug-twisted dream. The place had somehow filled up around me, and Smith was about to disappear into the crowd.

I lurched to my feet and went after him.

"I need to talk to you," I whispered at him hoarsely.

He turned slowly, and those tiny, hot eyes went into me, burning me the way they had once before, somewhere else that I didn't quite remember.

"What?"

"I need to talk to you. Outside." I had to lean against the wall of a booth, but otherwise I was all right.

"What about?" His face had no expression, was as slick and hard as blue-black clay.

"Adonine," I said.

Smith turned to the two people he was with and muttered, "Excuse me. I'll be just a second."

I led the way to the back door. I could barely feel my feet and I had to move slowly to keep my balance. We went through the metal fire door, and the cold air poured over me like the water of a frozen lake.

"Now. What was it you wanted?" Smith's voice was hollow and soft, as if it wasn't really coming from his body.

"Adonine," I croaked. "I'm an addict. I need help."

He tilted his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Adonine!" I shouted. "The drug! Like you gave Matheson! Like you gave Davis!"

"Matheson?" he said, with a gentle sort of curiosity. "Davis? Am I supposed to know these people?"

"Don't lie to me, you bastard!" I shouted, moving in on him. "You know what I'm talking about. Now give it to me!"

His eyes widened with fear. I grabbed the lapels of his coat and felt a sudden tingling. It was a sensation I'd had before, in a dream somewhere. He brushed my hands away.

"Get away from me," he hissed. Sweat started out across his bald, tapering head, and he backed away.

"No more crap, Smith!" I shouted. "Give me the drug!"

I lunged for him again and missed, falling into the snow against the side of the building. Smith was glancing nervously from side to side, but he had nowhere to run. I was blocking his only way out. He backed up until he was spread-eagled against the back wall of the alley.

I grabbed him again and started to shake him. "The drug, Smith! Give me the drug!"

He screamed, and with a sudden movement he threw me aside. My head went into the pavement, stunning me for an instant. But I got up on my hands and knees and started for him again.

And froze.

"No," I whispered. "No, no, it can't be...."

But it was.

Smith's eyes were closing and he was drawing into himself like a trap-

ped animal. Then, very slowly, he folded his arms and tucked his head to his chest.

His body seemed to sparkle for a moment in the gray light of evening, then he was gone.



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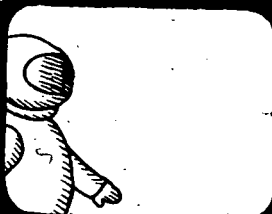
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A NON-REVIEW OF A NON-EVENT

A few years back, I reported on the television presentation of the annual awards in the area of science fiction, fantasy and horror films. At the time, I viewed it as one more of those TV non-events, a rather silly ceremony with a certain amusement value if you didn't take it too seriously.

Well, it crawled back onto my screen a few days ago, and seems determined to be an annual event, (or non-event, as the case may be). (What happened in the intervening years[s] I'm not sure; I may have been prevented by a personal providence from noticing that it was on, or it may not have made it to this area, being syndicated.) Therefore, alas, it will have to be taken seriously, if not graciously, and there is only one word that can be used for it. That word is *embarrassing*, for any one who makes science fiction and fantasy films, who writes about them, or who simply loves seeing them.

Host Mark Hamill set the generally irritating and inept tone of the goings-on with his second or third sentence, which was "Welcome to the 7th Annual Science Fiction Awards." Not "science fiction *film* awards," mind you. Now I'm fully aware that even in this supposedly informal kind of proceedings, actors do not write their own lines, but I do presume they have the sense God gave them and ability to ask for changes on the more obviously in-

ane things they have to say, if only to keep themselves from looking any more like fools than they have to.

In any case, Hamill was not alone in the embarrassment sweepstakes. George Hamilton in several appearances camped it up in his Dracula number from *Love At First Bite*, and one of those people who receive awards for people who have had the good sense not to show up remarked that it (the award) would make another great bookend. The two Flash Gordons, Buster Crabbe and Sam J. Jones, had an asinine exchange about playing Flash Gordon in the future in the past, and we were told by someone else that *Rollerball* was an "epic fantasy."

There was a dance number to the "Klinton Battle" music from *Star Trek the Motion Picture*. It resembled the spring dance recital of Miss Terwilliger's School of Tap, Ballet and Baton Twirling. And Mr. Hamill closed by telling us that the awards were "very unique," i.e. they were especially one-of-a-kind.

I could go on, but I won't. I would presume the general ambience comes clear, but before drawing general conclusions I must say that the token literary figure present was A.E. van Vogt, who presented the "lifetime career award(s)" and came across with dignity, literacy, and poise (but then again, I may be prejudiced in favor of those who can read and write).

But aside from Mr. van Vogt and Kermit, the frog, the proceedings were,

in a repetitive word, embarrassing. I know the science fiction/horror film has not been the most dignified or mature of art forms over the years, but it will never be considered so if it continues to be "honored" in this fashion. *Star Wars* and its ilk *are*, in one sense, juvenile adventure, but they show the same conceptual daring and potential that the works of E.E. (Doc) Smith did in *their* day (in which *they* were considered juvenile adventure by many), and look at all the mature and breathtaking written works to follow them.

And, just speaking for today, the good s/f and horror films of the present have an enormous array of brilliant talent working on them, in special effects, music, script writing, and production in general, that deserves better and more dignified recognition than this sad ceremony confers.

In all fairness, I can hardly throw the entire blame on the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films (I'm not sure I have that exactly right, but no one on the show seemed all that sure, either). There is certainly a basic knowledgability going there, if only judging by their categorizations. It's on whomever they trusted the award show to be produced as a mindless television non-event that the blame should be placed, and so far as I'm concerned, that person should be placed in a defective transporter and beamed far, far away.

After that diatribe, I'd like to close with some positive paragraphs just to

prove I can do it, on a few bits and pieces I haven't had time to catch up with over the past few months.

After many years, I saw the wonderful Powell and Pressburger *Tales of Hoffman* again, and am again awestruck. The fact that it's a filmed opera may scare some sensitive souls, but a more phantasmagoric stew of robots, enchantresses, lost souls and magic has never been seen on screen, and it's filmed so imaginatively that it's the closest live-action cinema has ever come to *Fantasia* (and the music helps).

I was also re-impressed by two

more recent productions on a second seeing. *Zardoz* still may be the most intellectually demanding science fiction film ever made; in fact, I feel its restricted following is due to the number of people who simply didn't get it, including even relatively sophisticated s/f readers. And I ended up the three-part British series, *An Englishman's Castle*, shattered all over again. Here also, a production that is astonishingly intelligent in every detail makes this story of an alternate 1970s in which the Germans had won WW II mind-stretching science fiction at its very best.



COMING SOON

Next month: "The Fire When It Comes," a new novelet by Parke Godwin. This impressive F&SF debut is a fresh and engaging ghost story written from the point of view of the ghost, a young actress whose haunt is an apartment on Manhattan's upper West Side. Also, "The Thermals of August," new SF by Edward Bryant, plus stories by Lisa Tuttle, R. Bretnor and many others. Look for the May issue, on sale April 2.

Thomas Sullivan wrote "The Fugue," November 1980. His new story concerns the bizarre transplant of a middle-aged Jewish brain into a young Italian body and the even stranger results.

The Case for Kosher Pasta

BY
TOM SULLIVAN

Except for the headaches, he probably enjoyed dying. That's how big a ham Mario was. Even though he was scared. And you had to be scared when half the quacks at University Hospital in Ann Arbor gave you thumbs-down and wanted to try the wildest operation ever on you and let your family tree visit you twenty-four hours a day when you had roots that went back to Adam and what's-her-name.

Even the priest was on call. Mario's confessions got a little steeper each day. On Monday — when he was admitted — he groped in the dark of his soul and came up with two handfuls of petty larceny. On Tuesday he lit a match and discovered infidelity to his second wife, Sophie, and fifteen years' tax evasion. By Friday he had the floodlights on and the crimes fairly flaked off his soul like wire-brushed

rust. He horrified the priest, who thought seriously of calling in a second shift to handle the overflow. But Mario was left cleansed. God would forgive. That left the Mafia.

After each of these sessions Mama Benutto accelerated in, arms wide, gushing blessings and faith. He must pray, she would plead. God would take away the headaches if he prayed hard enough. Behind her, Papa invariably rotated the brim of his hat. An infidel pose. *What's wrong with aspirin?* his silence asked.

And Rose. First wife. Alimony. Mario would like to have died on Rose and her bulldog lawyer. He could hear her anguish. Better than when he had hit the brakes while she was putting on her lipstick for the VanCliburn concert. Better even than taking the dog's pill by mistake. What the hell, the only ailment she had never claimed to suffer

from was heartworms.

In the end he told the doctors he would go for the operation.

Above him, one floor closer to God, Amos Addlestein lay dying of cancer. He was fifty-two — twenty years older than Mario — a former Rhodes scholar, a banker, wealthy, reverent, plain, perfunctory. And angry. What the hell had given him cancer? Kosher nitrites? Newport? X-rays? The carbon tet fumes in the dry cleaners where he had worked as a boy? It was an outrage. You slept next to a glow-in-the-dark clock for ten years, and then they told you it was shooting you full of zappatinos. There oughta be a law. The government should tax cancer out of existence like they did everything else. The government. Couldn't even spell "Congress" in the Constitution. *Congrefs.*

In his head was an audit of reasons to live and die:

Arnold. Minus sign. His heir apparent, waiting to begin life on father's money.

Arnold's wife, Helen, minus sign, who had already spent it.

His grandchildren, Harold and Sarah, minus signs, more direct but equally greedy.

Then there was wife Miriam. Snails had more passion. He shared the blame. Mr. Excitement he wasn't. Below the names was one last notation. *Bank examiners.* The quarter million he had gradually siphoned out of

bank accounts was about to be discovered.

What the hell. Dead was dead. Forfeit account. Out of circulation. He would rather be in the clink than in the vault. Six minus signs equaled three plusses. when the doctor entered later, he told him he would undergo the operation.

They met just once before the transplant of Amos' brain into Mario's body was attempted. That was in a lounge in cancer ward. Mario stood in the doorway, Amos sat in a wheelchair by the window.

"You're Jewish ..." Mario said.

"You're Italian ..." from Amos.

"Mama mia."

"Oy veh." Amos' eyes rolled upward. "This is immortality? Better I should die and go to hell now."

Mario's eyes sought a higher point on the ceiling. "For a lousy headache I got to become a Jew?"

Thus delivered, they sighed.

"Doc said I could veto the first candidate," Mario said.

"For the sake of compatibility, may your next one have long ears and Bray."

"Equals equal to equals, Addlestein. The doctors said we were *made* for each other."

"True. What's the point in lying? Maybe this will become the synthesis for a new religion. We might make pope. Even higher."

"Jesus!"

"Right."

"Cut the funny stuff, Addlestein. I just hope you appreciate my body, that's all. I just hope you realize what a finely tuned thing it is."

"It's a *thing*?"

"— I'm a scratch golfer, a marathoner, a terror on the racquetball courts, and, given decent inspiration, I make Frazer the lion look impotent."

"How's your ear?"

"My *what*?"

"Deaf, huh? Too bad. I play classical flute. Not likely those hairy stubs could ever handle arpeggios."

"A flute! Listen, Addlestein, you a fag or something?"

"... and a weak self-image beneath all that braying. I don't think I'll tell you, th-silly goos-th."

"I knew it. A fag to boot. Got it hidden with a lotta word games, but he's a fag. Well, that's gonna change, Addlestein. My genes won't take it, see. I'll give you hemorrhoids, ulcers, gas. I'll itch. My white blood cells will go on strike —"

"I doubt it."

"I'll wet the bed —"

"Desist. I'm not interested in sex."

"Not interested! What d'you mean *not interested*?"

"I mean I'm in control of my passions. An occasional bout is fine —"

"How occasional?"

"Once a month."

Mario visibly sagged. "You're already dead; you know that, Addlestein?"

"On the contrary, you haven't begun to live, Benutto. When I get hold of your body, I intend to abuse it with all the refinements of the mind. I intend to sleep twelve hours a night and nap in a hammock and eat all the things you can't possibly appreciate. Oysters, escargot —"

"I'll barf. You're rotten, Addlestein."

"Believe me, even with cancer I'm less rotten than you, Benutto."

"At least you can see what you're getting."

"So? You want maybe a resumé?"

It ended like that. No rematch before the operation.

For one hot July afternoon in Ann Arbor the world held its breath. Even twenty-first century odds were no better than three to one said Jimmy the Greek ... Junior. But the intricate connections were made, and the *New York Times* came out with a birth announcement: John Doe, 175 pounds, six foot one, age at birth thirty-two to fifty-two. They listed all four parents, including the fact that the Addlesteins were deceased.

It was Amos' brain that came awake in post-op, of course, sensing through Mario's body the landing pillow of soft effects they had surrounded him with. Anti-shock. They listened anxiously to his first words, fearing a hoarse, Frankensteinian cry of anguish.

"Call me Ishmael," he said, unable to resist the monstrously dramatic mo-

ment. And he laughed at being alive.

They all laughed.

Except Papa Benutto. And Arnold. And Helen.

"Take me to your leader," he said then. "I suppose you're all wondering why I called you here. Hey, Toots, is this Ashtabula?"

His exhilaration brought momentary alarm. But gradually the one-liners diminished and a more sober symbiosis appeared. He voiced the wish that the surgeons had joined the left-overs, too. Cancerous body and tumored brain. It might not live very long, but at least the doctors would have preserved all possible permutations of the lives they had reaggregated. No one was sure whether the wish was sadistic or masochistic, but each family insisted on a funeral for the remains. And Ishmael, being what he was, insisted they wait for his release so that he could attend both.

The doctors gave him a slow debut. No mirrors, no visitors. But of course he saw himself in the chrome bedrail. He felt himself inside and out. He tried out his new equipment and found he ate better, moved better, slept better, saw better, heard better ... and was it such a travesty, yes, he wanted sex again. He saw TV, too: the comic who read a medical bulletin about him that said "half dead"; the funeral announcement — "one foot in the grave." It didn't matter. Cancer mattered. Age mattered.

The funerals were held the day he

was released. Mario's brain first. Mama Benutto was all over him, shook him by the ear, wiped her eyes on his tie. Three children — *his* children — swarmed over every part of him that Mama hadn't surrounded. They swayed together and he caught sight of a tight-lipped, doe-like creature he knew must be his wife, Sophie. Papa Benutto was there but kept invoking the name of the deity in sudden fits resembling hiccoughs. "Sweet Mary," he said when Ishmael smiled at him, and walked out.

The funeral for Amos' body was held two hours later. Arnold and Helen kept icing him with looks that said he was a mere obstacle to the reading of his will. His grandchildren ran around, mourner's ribbons flapping, recounting his obituary. Only Miriam seemed convinced of his existence. Dear, sweet, faithful, disciplined, long-suffering wife. She had never been so brave, so supportive, so understanding. Squeezing his hand, clinging, embracing him.

Later the two families had a row in the park. Which is to say that Mama Benutto and Miriam yanked Ishmael between them until his teeth rattled. When he pledged half his life to each household, the Pax Romana was restored. A coin flip rendered Caesar's way, and Mama Benutto bore her baby boy's body off stage.

It was now necessary to throw a big party. Mama decreed it going home in the cab. All his friends would come.

How many did he have, he wanted to know. And she began listing by family, saying you remember so-and-so and wouldn't you like to see what's-his-name again, as if memory was some skin-deep process. She was still listing at dinnertime. Like a griot. She had made all his favorite foods, she insisted, but he hated pasta, and everything else was saturated with garlic and olive oil. His counter announcement that his favorite dish was gefillte fish landed heavily on the table, causing Papa to inhale a breadstick. The breadstick immediately came back like grape shot, and Papa wheezed his "sweet Mary" with all the inflections of a dirty carburetor. Excuse me! gottogo to the bathroom," Ishmael said.

But, alas, where *was* the bathroom?

He found himself in the kitchen where he skulked around the pantry briefly, went down the basement stairs, came up the basement stairs, and then, because the olive oil really was working, meekly returned for directions. Papa obligingly supplied them, along with explicit instructions. Virginal Anna blushed. Frank brightened. Eight-year-old Maria wore mama's hands like earphones. Mario stayed in the bathroom for two hours.

It was in the bathroom that he decided he was, after all, Amos and should get out of Mario's territory altogether: Sophie was a temptation, and if he could rape her while wearing her husband's body, well, that was a

fringe benefit, but his big problem was going to be disengaging. What if there was an Italian code that said that if you renounced your blood, it was recoverable drop by drop to the seventh cousin's uncle's half-brother's son? He had no doubt there was such a lineage and that if neither the seventh cousin, nor the uncle, nor the half brother bore him malice, there lurked a half-brother's son who would castrate him.

No. One didn't secede from the Roman Empire. One weakened it from within. He must be banished, exiled, kicked out.

Question: How?

Answer: Easy. Be himself.

The hardest thing to find was the flute, and he almost risked returning home the next day for his, but then he found one at a pawn shop and bought it along with a *yarmelke* and some fashionless clothes. He got a haircut, too, leaving more of Mario's dark ringlets on the floor of the barber shop than he kept on his head.

"Shalom!" he greeted the company at his open house that night. "I would like to play for you."

And they listened stunned and looked stunned at the sheared apparition in the skullcap who made bird noises through a silver tube. Where was Mario? Where were his rings and silk shirts and gregarious smiles? But then someone laughed and called him a great kidder and the whole thing was accepted as a charade. He went on being himself. Amos. He made a genuine

effort to discuss existentialism with the first three people who spoke to him, as if they were Senecas and Ciceros instead of Mario Benutto's Circus Maximus. At the end of an hour his reputation as an asshole was secure. Disgraced, his heart sang.

It was then that the less easily discouraged moved in. There was gold-toothed Dominic who told him not to worry about the hundred Mario owed him; next week would be fine. And thin-lipped Lou with the stuffed shoulders; he knew Mario was good for seventy-five. Babar, whose shoulders *looked* stuffed but were real, wanted some reassurance over a matter of five Cs. Sandwiched between came a sallow pepper named Chi-Chi, three months pregnant and granite sure who the father was.

"But I've had a vasectomy," he protested academically.

"Oh, well, then I'm not really pregnant," she gushed, pleased. "My doctor will really be surprised."

"You don't understand. I mean you can't blame *me* for it. *I've* had a vasectomy. Me. Up here."

"Up there? No, love, no one gets a vasectomy up there. Down here—A little late to be coy, my love. Vasectomies don't count up there. Boy, will *your* doctor be surprised."

"Listen, young lady, I have never had the pleasure of your company, to be quite literal."

"Oh, you got your jollies, all right."

"I wasn't in my right mind."

"Yes, you haven't been yourself, have you? Call it an out-of-body experience, then. Sue your surgeon for the most unkind cut of all. But right now you're wearing the bod I loved and yearn to describe ... in court."

She was replaced by a pair of muscle-bound heavies with goitered necks. It hardly came as a surprise to him that he owed the brotherhood of Sicily 15,500 dollars. The nice gentlemen said so. The one cracking walnuts in his left hand suggested a generous timetable for repayment. Forty-eight hours or the rest of his life, whichever came first. Mario thought it might be a tie but said nothing out of concern for the gentleman's unsafe habit of swallowing the shells with the walnuts.

He lasted another day.

Rose's lawyer began to call at 9:10 a.m. accenting the word alimony on the third syllable. Al-i-mo'-ny. Italian ice cream. He called again at 10:30, 12:05, 2:15 and 4:00, just to make sure Mario hadn't forgotten. Mario countered with worthless threats. He had two identities, and if both were responsible for al-i-mo'-ny, then Rose was a bigamist. The lawyer told him a joke about a big-a-mist being an Italian fog.

Between taking calls, he ran up 108 minutes of near zone time to Blue Cross in a futile attempt to secure coverage for the recent transplant. It wasn't that Mario Benutto hadn't been

covered. He was. Or that Amos Addlestein didn't have their fullest policy. He did. It was that the claims were being handled separately, and since each reviewer took the attitude that the other patient's card was the one that should be billed, neither could be paid.

That night he tried to make love with Sophie but was rejected out of fear that her husband's tumor-ridden brain might rise out of the grave and cast her into hell for infidelity. He longed for Miriam and next morning departed for home.

But if he thought it was tough being out of his mind at the Benutto's, it was even tougher being in it at the Addlestein's. He was greeted by his basset — incissors, left calf. He tried to overlook that. After all, it wasn't his body. Then there was Helen, whose expectations included the immediate resolution of his will. She was in strict mourning. Hard chairs, no TV, pictures turned toward the wall. His brother was drinking. The kids wanted to see his scars, and Arnold, it seemed, had been trying to collect on his life insurance. Only two people believed in his existence. The bank examiners and dear, sweet, faithful, disciplined, long-suffering Miriam.

It was Miriam who took him aside to the bedroom and told him she understood how lonely he must feel.

"Oh, Amos, Amos ... how awful it must be trapped inside that big, strange body," she said.

"I don't notice it," he shrugged.

"... so different, so alien, so ... overpowered."

"Not really."

"I'll help you escape, Amos. I want to help you escape. I want to unlock the real you inside that ... that hulking beast. Oh, Amos, let yourself go. Come out to me. Come out to your wife."

"I've never seen you like this, Miriam."

"Nor I you. I've got to be different, because you're different. I've got to prove my love to you."

"I believe you, Miriam."

"No. I've got to *show* you. Let me show you."

"That's really not necessary —"

She grabbed and the buttons flew off his shirt like shelled corn. Dismayed, he merely stood there while she went into action. Miriam. Dear, sweet, disciplined, long-suffering ... it was enough to make a man impotent. But she revealed such a range of skills and techniques that he was aroused in spite of himself.

A guilt-ridden smile distorted her face when it was over. "Oh, Amos, I had to inspire you," she said. "You see how much I love you?"

Inspired he was. For the first time he felt as young as his body. But where had she acquired such prowess? Reading Henry Miller. Studying restroom walls? Three decades of sexual fantasizing in the afternoons? He felt betrayed.

"It's not me you love," he said. "It's Mario's body."

"You're Mario's body," she said, sounding hurt.

He lay awake thinking that. It *was* his body. Why be jealous of himself? Any man would be ecstatic to discover what he had discovered in his wife. It was exactly that out-of-character shamelessness that made an otherwise discreet woman a perfect mate. He had to quit thinking of himself as Amos. *I'm going to take a name*, he thought. *A legal name. Not Ishmael. Jordan something. Jordan Wayne. Like the Duke but with a little individuality.*

"I am reborn!" he announced at breakfast.

"Arnold and I have decided to have you declared legally dead," Helen squelched him. "You are not Amos Addlestein. Amos Addlestein died of cancer. Tell him, Arnold. You are not Arnold's father, whoever-you-are. Tell him, Arnold."

"You're not my father," Arnold mumbled.

"There. What did I tell you? It's nothing personal, you know. We wish Arnold's father had lived, but we can't accept an imposter. You're welcome to stay until you're legally dead. Then, I'm afraid, you'll have to move out."

Jordan Wayne gave a tough rebuttal. After breakfast. To Miriam. *Run away with me*, Miriam said. Jordan Wayne was shaken.

It was the beginning of a conspiracy to starve him to death. Chi-Chi's

lawyer got to him with a paternity suit just before lunch, and the bank examiners fingered him for embezzlement in time to spoil dinner.

The arrest for embezzlement didn't stick. A judge ordered him released in the morning on grounds that he was not entirely Amos and therefore not entirely responsible. So to speak. A higher court judge subsequently ordered him re-imprisoned because his "... willful and motivational faculties" were, indeed, Amos'. A still loftier magistrate then overturned it again by stating that an innocent body was being made to suffer confinement and that that represented a shotgun approach to justice. In between trips to jail, Arnold and Helen coaxed, begged and finally demanded to know where he had hidden the quarter million grafted from the bank.

"Ask Amos Addlestein," he said with delicious triumph. He could hardly wait for Rose and her al-i-mo'ny lawyer to find out. And Papa Benutto, he could hear his "sweet Mary!" all the way across town.

Miriam could care less. "Run away with me," she whispered impassioned. And that bothered him. Too much of him had died in the exchange at University Hospital. Everybody wanted to grab what they wanted from what was left. He was a human garage sale.

The whole thing quit being simple when nut-cracker and his friend caught up with him at a MacDonald's outside the Detroit House of Corrections.

"Where is our fifteen-five?" the heavy demanded.

Jordan Wayne was seized by a suicidal impulse to be The Quiet Man, True Grit and Rooster Cogburn all at once. "I am not Mario Benutto," he said evenly.

"First, we gonna squeeze your head," said nut-cracker matter-of-factly.

"Oh, please, I'll get the money," Jordan pleaded immediately. "But they're trying to get me declared dead, and my assets are frozen, and I can't touch the Swiss accounts for a while, and if you kill me both of me will be one-hundred-percent dead and what-goodwillbeburriedallovertown!"

"Second, we is gonna thump on you "

University Hospital. Neurological ward. He had been transferred there from New Grace in Detroit after two weeks. The swelling in his face was scarcely noticeable now; the rings around his eyes were paling; he was back on solid foods. And he could have visitors.

Mama Benutto came first, begging to be recognized by "her little altar boy." Papa stood in the doorway and for once sweet Mary got a rest.

"Mario, Mario," Mama wailed, "how is it you don't remember *me*?"

"He got hit on the head, Mama," said Papa. "Those bad friends of his, they give him amnesia. Maybe it's a good thing. At least he ain't acting like

that other guy no more."

He hadn't remembered her before the amnesia for that matter, but Mama was like a hen counting chicks and coming up one short. She went away reluctantly.

Helen and Arnold were next. Demure, smiling.

"Hello, Dad," Arnold began. "I guess you don't remember me but I'm your son."

"He's your son," Helen affirmed.

"We're pulling for you, Dad."

"Pulling for you." Helen gave it a wink and a gentle uppercut.

"We're doing our best to keep your affairs in order until ... until you're well again. Sure is a mess, though."

"A mess," Helen nodded.

"Dad — uh, I don't suppose you remember anything. Anything at all, huh?" He took a nudge from his wife. "Details, I mean. So we can straighten out this misunderstanding with the bank."

"What misunderstanding?"

Arnold inhaled. "About the quarter of a million dollars. I don't suppose you remember where that is, huh?"

"Quarter of a million?"

"He remembers," Helen monotoned in a whisper.

"I don't remember," the figure on the bed said dramatically and his arm flopped over his brow.

"He remembers," Helen said out loud. Arnold tried to shush her, but she quickly became livid. "You remember, you old fraud! Think you'll make

a fool of us, eh? Well, we're still gonna declare you dead. Dead, dead, dead! You'll be so stinking dead flowers will grow out of your nose! No one will speak to you, the government won't pay you social security, and your driver's license will say 'deceased'! You hear me?"

She stomped out, the air crackling. Arnold cast about a few seconds longer, echoed "Boy, are you gonna be dead!" and flowed after her.

The tall, pencil of a woman who burst into the room at their departure was Mario Benutto's first wife Rose.

"Hah!" she said, and with her fingers bunched together hammered out: "Twenty-three al-i-mo'-ny payments you owe me. First you got no brain, then you got one quarter million dollars, then you got no memory, now you got no money again. That's what they tell me. But I want to hear it from you. Mario, you know me?" She bent hawk-like into his slow negative head shake. "You got money?" Again the scrutiny. Again the shake. "Hah! You know, for once I believe you. I always know when you lie. You grin like big, silly sheep you are. All-a time grin. You hear that, Chi-Chi?" She moved aside to reveal the authoress of the paternity suit against him. "He got no money, no memory, no nothin'!"

"Well, Mario," Chi-Chi sighed, "I guess you're for real, and I guess I'll

have to let you off the hook. Anyone who took in a homeless brain when it didn't have a body to turn to can't be all bad. But if you ever remember where that money is "

For a long while after they left he lay quietly. He was tired. Very tired. He must have slept because he was suddenly aware of another presence in the room, someone he hadn't seen enter, sitting just above his peripheral vision at the head of the bed. He made no effort to look but rather waited for this one, be it harpy or shrew, to speak.

"Run away with me, Amos," she said.

He craned to see Miriam.

"If you really don't remember me, then I haven't got a prayer," she went on. "But if you do, then you ought to know that I don't care about the money. You ought to know what I can offer Amos' mind. And Mario's body. And you ought to know that the embezzlement case has been dropped. *Run away with me, Amos.*"

He stared at her blankly. You damn near had to die to find out who was on your side in this world, he thought. Dear, sweet, faithful, disciplined, long-suffering Miriam. And she could make love like a nymphomaniac. The money wouldn't hurt either. Slowly he smiled. "How about Switzerland," he said.



THE FASTEST GROWING CHURCH IN THE WORLD

by Brother Keith E. L'Hommiedieu, D.D.

It's quite safe to say that of all the organized religious sects on the current scene, one church in particular stands above all in its unique approach to religion. The Universal Life Church is the only organized church in the world with no traditional religious doctrine. In the words of Kirby J. Hensley, founder, "The ULC only believes in what is right, and that all people have the right to determine what beliefs are right for them, as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others."

Reverend Hensley is the leader of the worldwide Universal Life Church with a membership now exceeding 7 million ordained ministers of all religious beliefs. Reverend Hensley started the church in his garage by ordaining ministers by mail. During the 1960's, he traveled all across the country appearing at college rallies held in his honor where he would perform mass ordinations of thousands of people at a time. These new ministers were then exempt from being inducted into the armed forces during the undeclared Vietnam war.

In 1966 Reverend Hensley was fighting the establishment on another front. The IRS tried to claim the ULC wasn't a legal church and proceeded to impound the ten thousand dollars in the church bank account. The feisty Hensley filed suit against the IRS in federal district court for return of the funds and to permanently establish the ULC as a legal tax exempt entity. On March 1, 1974 Judge James F. Battin ruled against the IRS in his decision which stated, "Neither this court or any branch of this government will consider the merits or fallacies of a religion. Nor will the court praise or condemn a religion. Were the court to do so, it would impinge upon the guarantees of the First Amendment." The judge then ordered the IRS to return the impounded money and to grant the Universal Life Church its tax exempt status.

Reverend Hensley has stated that he believes a church is people and not just a fancy building. He also believes in total freedom and equality for all people. The ULC will ordain anyone without regard to religious beliefs, race, nationality, sex or age.

The ULC's success formula is both effective and unquestionably legal. After a person has become an ordained minister, he or she can join with two other people and form their own Universal Life Church. These three people then make up the Board of Directors consisting of a Pastor, a Secretary and a Treasurer. The ULC will then grant the group the use of its legal church charter complete with both federal and state tax exempt numbers. The newly formed church may then open a bank account in the church's name. Any member of the church can legally donate up to 50% of his or her outside income to the church and take a corresponding tax deduction. The church in turn can pay the complete housing cost of its minister including rent or mortgage payment, insurance, taxes, furnishings and repairs. The church can also provide the minister with full use of an automo-



Brother L'Hommiedieu is Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Universal Life Church and serves on the Board of Directors of the International Universal Life Church, Inc.

bile as well as pay for travel and educational expenses. None of these expenses are reported as income to the IRS. Recently a whole town in Hardensburg, New York became Universal Life ministers and turned their homes into religious retreats and monasteries thereby relieving themselves of property taxes, at least until the state tries to figure out what to do.

Churches enjoy certain other tax benefits over the common man on the street. For instance, a church can legally buy and sell real-estate or stocks and bonds completely tax free. It can receive tax free income from bank deposits or mortgages. Many churches own large publishing, recording, or other related businesses like hospitals, clinics and schools without paying any income tax.

A church can sponsor any kind of fund raising event such as a concert, play or even bingo. Churches are also exempt from paying inheritance taxes. When the pastor of the church dies, the Board of Directors simply appoints a new pastor and the church goes on.

Reverend Hensley has stated that he personally doesn't believe in the tax exempt status of churches. However, if the government is going to give a free ride to Billy Graham and the Pope, then why not let everybody participate in these blessings. Furthermore, he backs his words up by offering to defend in court the tax exempt status of his congregations.

Since the church was founded in 1962, it has attracted members who are movie and TV personalities, businessmen, government officials, lawyers, and doctors as well as all types of regular working people. During the last 15 years the Universal Life Church has blossomed into a full blown grass roots populace movement. Reverend Hensley is ordaining ten thousand new ministers a week and predicts that the church will have over 20,000,000 members by the early 1980's. In addition, requests for interviews and TV appearances continue to pour in.

Anyone who is a member of the ULC will tell you that the ULC is destined to change the world. By unifying mankind into a brotherhood of freedom orientated individuals, each respecting the other's right to live life as they see fit, the Universal Life Church hopes to put an end to all wars. Reverend Hensley admits that this is a pretty monumental task to accomplish, but he also points out that he is already well on the way to reaching his goal.

Rev. Hensley invites all those interested in becoming an ordained minister and receiving complete information and Minister's Credentials, to send a \$10.00 tax deductible donation to the Universal Life Church, 1335 Seabright Ave., Dept. 275, Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

Ian Watson's last story here was "The World Science Fiction Convention of 2080" (October 1980). His latest contribution takes a vast subject — the theft of Earth's nighttime stars — and compresses it perfectly into a very short and ironic tale.

Nightmares

BY

IAN WATSON

*Now the day is over,
Nightmares drawing nigh;
Shadows of the evening
Steal away our sky....*

They circle the world widdershins, keeping to the dusk and darkness, shunning the full Sun: the terrible shapes, the world riders, the nightmares. They eat up all the stars, so that we are alone in the universe with only the Sun for company and the ghostly daytime Moon. If they had come a few thousand years earlier, there would never have been astronomy or cosmology at all — or only a cramped cosmology of terror.

What are they? Some deep space, cold-seeded life form, incomprehensible to us, creatures of formaldehyde, hydroxyl... Perhaps. They secret a

radio-acid that cuts us off instantly from any satellite we launch. We see them by what they hide, but we know them not. (Radio—and radio astronomy—are dead pigeons. We can't even listen to the stars.)

Perhaps they cannot escape from the lee side of Earth into which they plunged for shelter, robbing us of the stars? Perhaps they are the victims, and not us? Yet we feel victimized. The sheer rolling, convulsive darkness that precedes the night! One senses the movements in it—the tentacles, the mouths, the dark eyes—rather than seeing anything positive. Fear invades our dreams, and we waken to worse fear—to claustrophobia, to the wet strait jacket drying round the mental patient, suffocating him; to the sensory deprivation box, where any horror hallucinates itself. That is our nighttime.

At last we are ready to burn them off the world's backside, and see our stars and galaxy again....

We're launching by day, so we'll have half an hour in space before our orbit takes us round into nightmare. We could hardly transfer to deeper space to unfold *Sunflower* on our very first orbit. There are too many systems to check; we'll be cut off from Houston and the help of any ground computer by the radio blanket.

The most massive payload lift there's ever been! And here we four, who will see the stars again today, lie waiting on our control couches: Russell, Calvin, Emil and I.

"I wonder if they're all still there?" quips Russell. "The stars, I mean? The universe?"

It's a queasy joke, though. What proof is there that the rest of the universe is still there? Apart from the massive probability that it still is.... There have been suggestions, apparently seriously intensioned, that we may no longer be in the same universe as before, that the nightmares have draped themselves across the sky to stop us from seeing something, that they are a sort of temporary wallpaper thrown up around the room of Earth while the walls are being removed—and new walls will be in their place when they wind up again and retire. Perhaps the universe has always been an illusion, a mere projection, a *trompe l'oeil*, which our telescopes

have been pursuing too hard, overloading the data resources of the illusion. Perhaps we've been chasing the distant galaxies away too fast and furiously for convenience....

Strange religious and exotic metaphysics flourish at such times.

Needless to say, none of us is anything less than hardline rational and pragmatic, which is why we find Russell's joke embarrassing. There's a job to do. We're going to focus the Sun's rays on those cosmic leaches and burn them off—if they hate the great light so much.

But we will all be blind men soon, after our half-hour's renewed spectacle of stars—save for the cabin lights. Will we even see our own cabin lights? Do steel walls and thick windows necessarily stop the black nightmares from perfusing through?

The last phone line jerks away. So it's all automatic now, the launch; no way to halt it.

T minus sixty seconds, and counting. But no external voice will count for us; already we're separated from the Earth by an utter silence.

T minus fifty-nine....

We go. We rise, we are crushed and squeezed. T plus, T plus.

We fly free. Our weight vanishes....

The stars are there! All our old familiar stars in their old familiar patterns!

Greetings to Arcturus, Spica, Reg-

ulus... Although we can't tell anyone back home that you're still there.

Now there are only twenty minutes to the terminator—which terminates so much more these days....

"Here we go—I!" The terrible shapes seem quite tightly humped about the Earth. They don't tail out into deep space, in Earth's umbra, but hug close.

If all else fails, we can stone the horses' eyes....! So sang an old rock group, *The Doors*; my son is an aficionado of such things. What did that line of song mean to *The Doors*? Suddenly it means a lot to me. We will stone their eyes with sunlight, those mares of night!

We pass through the nightmares. We continue to see each other and our instruments and the cabin around us. Nothing perfuses through. Yet outside there is nothing, either. Plain nothing: as thick as treacle to the eye, though obviously as thin as vacuum, since nothing slows us, since we don't ablate in burning flakes of chaff.

Light dawns again; sunlight and the stars. Our orbit is unperturbed; our state of mind, sane.

We prepare to eject ourselves into Sun orbit, trailing the Earth.

"Supposing *Sunflower* doesn't work?" murmurs Emil. "It isn't the full force of day we'll be shining on them...."

"Maybe they'll get the message

anyway, and piss off," snaps Calvin. "A wink is as good as a nod."

How much daylight do we hope to beam back upon the world? A millionth of one percent of what the daylight side of the world receives.... Yet it may still be enough, focused upon much smaller areas of the nightmare side. We will be a mini-Sun to anyone who can see us down there.... But we may simply punch a hole, an eye in the hurricane of darkness. The nightmares may simply stream around this open patch, roiling and coiling. That won't help anyone to see the stars; they'll only see a second day.

Our nightmares *must* be photophobic — must hate light. (Mustn't they?) From up here, their nature remains as ambiguous as ever: darkly clamped around dark Earth, beings of anti-light (though not of antimatter — there's no wild aurora of particle annihilation), unanalyzable entities fused into a hemispherical mass, yet conveying the sense of separate beings densely packed — octopoids of space, many tentacled, yet gaseous and thin, tying multiple knots around each other, oozing, streaming, clotting... so utterly deep-sea dark. We can't fathom their nature. Pray Heaven (the Heaven of Vega, Sirius and Aldebaran) that we can drive them off!

T plus 82 hours; we're ready to deploy. Russell drifts beside the Earthward window, surveying our home

pool of darkness and the blazing Sun beyond, dampened by the light-reactive glass. This is the Great Moment. Emil places his finger upon mine, upon the GO switch. It is a sacrament.

"Go," commands Russell....

Already my instruments tell how successfully we are deploying the hundreds of square kilometers of monomolecular fabric of the *Sunflower* mirror. (The effect will be the same as a solar windsail for us; we'll tend, from this moment on, to be pushed more and more off course. Here is where we might be lost forever, our skeletons slowly pushed towards the nearest star. Yet the solar wind is what shapes our mirror; we need it. Ten thousand tiny sunpower units in the mirror web will hold us in solar orbit, pressing back against the Sun as we pace the world. The whole business is very delicate.)

"It's okay!" I call. "A couple of power units aren't responding, but the rest are... perfect."

Easy now—blindingly easy—to see how well the great mirror spreads out around us, with us as the tiny spider at the heart.

A little later, Calvin—at the telescope—cries, "I can see through! I see Hawaii!" Which is where we are focusing all our reflected light right now, upon the darkness over the islands.

Russell, taking the wider view, exclaims in surprise, "They're quitting! I mean really quitting. The darkness has a different quality all over, I swear.

Can't you see? They're flowing to the edge of day. They're bunching at the terminator. They're really traveling."

"I can see city lights all over the West Coast now. Portland, L.A.... There's Mexico City. Everywhere's coming clear at once. But how? It only ought to be Hawaii. It's too much."

Russell panics. "We've driven them round to steal the day! There'll be no light on the day side. They'll freeze the world. This can't be. They hate light.... Don't they?"

"Maybe they've only been asleep the last five years," murmurs Emil. "Now they've woken up. It's their daytime. Feeding time.... If they feed on light."

We try to radio Hawaii. No contact is possible; the radio blanket stays in place.

Then, half an hour later:

"The Sun!" cries Calvin. The Sun flowers. It blooms terribly, as we hide our eyes. White brilliance bursts beyond our darkened glass.

"Sol has flared," says Russell clinically. "It hasn't blown up. This isn't a nova—not quite a nova. But enough of one. Perhaps a threefold increase in output. Enough to burn the Earth clean of life, except the deep seas. And those would be damn deep with every inch of ice melted!"

And our nightmares, whom we thought we chased away—with that *pinprick*—are all round on the day side now. They've put themselves in the

way as a shield. What are they, who have saved us? What wonderful beings?

They haven't saved us personally. Just everyone else on Earth. We four are lost, in the glare of light and radiation. We hunch down behind as much bulky equipment as we can. The particle flux will reach us before long.

It's hot....

The refrigeration, such as it is, is full on. We expected to need warming, not chilling.

So hot.

Still alive, for a little while. Yet sick, so sick. The air's full of floating filth, Russell floats fetally, exhausted by vomiting. Emil in coma; Calvin delirious.

We parted from the great mirror web. We let the Sun's fierce wind whip it away from us. Even so, to Earth there's no returning. Our computer's memories are scrambled by the radiation, and we've lost other systems too. In any case, we are already dead. Sick unto death. So we will follow a great ellipse of our own that will take us round the Sun for a few centuries before dropping us into the furnace.

While the Earth lives, sheltered from the glare, not by nightmares but by the most wonderful dreams one could ever have conceived: those shapes who came to save Humanity by hiding the sky, the terribly bright sky.

After four days, the glare abates; the Sun calms down. I drift by the win-

dow, watching as well as I can, as the window lightens to a clearer transparency once more. A finger's push propels me; if we weren't in free fall I doubt I'd have the strength to drag myself about.

Calvin raves and mumbles, bumping up against a bulkhead; I haven't the power to secure him.

As I watch, the nightmares rise at last. I see them rise from the day side of the Earth in a great fluid concave dish the size of half a world. On the inside this dish is dark, pitch black. On the outside it is burnished bright, aswarm with living light. How beautiful it is, that bowl of night and day. Now everyone must know its true nature: the protector entity. Gathering speed, it rushes away Sunwards, to bend back into the deeps. An angel bowl, angelic light. They have drunk the death of the Earth, in a miracle, that the human race may live on. How can we repay them? How can we find them again one day? I do not think it's God, exactly, that bowl of dark and light, only a very wonderful swarm of beings. Perhaps his angels: demons whom he cast down from the high sky to the lower sky, who now rise, redeemed....

No, simply space-beings, hardly comprehensible to us.

Will we dare go out into space again, after this? Oh, yes, we must, to catch up with them and learn their nature. This must be our whole purpose from now on, our very existence.

The bright-dark swarm spins fur-

ther away. After a while I prod myself towards the radio, concentrating on not dying just yet.

The blanket effect, that kept the particle flux from Earth, is gone along with them.

"Do you read me, Earth? This is *Sunflower*, do you read me?" Pray that the radio isn't ruined, as we are ruined, bodily.

Ten seconds, fifteen.

"*Sunflower*, we read you, signal strength two—" Static crackles.

"We're dying, Earth.... But that doesn't matter. Did you see?"

"Oh, yes! You chased them off—you really did it. You're great guys, wonderful men. God, but it's marvelous, we can see the stars again! You chased the damned things off at last! Are you all okay?"

Suddenly I realize: they don't know. They've no way of knowing

that the Sun flared up. That was all hidden from their eyes, or there'd have been no eyes to see, no minds to know. Didn't the Moon reflect the flare-up? No... it was a crescent Moon, hidden from Earth too by the shield of space-beings. If anyone saw Mars or Jupiter brighten... then they'd know. But who would be manning an observatory after five years' darkness, and worrying about Mars? When the nightmares shifted to darken the day, all minds would have been on that and that alone.

They don't even realize we're dying, our signal is so weak.

"You don't understand.... You didn't see what really happened. None of you. They saved us all. The Sun—" But I can hardly speak. I'm trembling-weak and overcome with nausea. "The Sun flared up.... They absorbed it all, they masked it, that's why they came

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and waited all these years—for the moment....”

Calvin drifts closer, rambling incoherently and noisily; his eyes are open, but he doesn't know who I am. I hope they can tell my voice—such as it is—from his.

“Do you hear me, Earth?”

Seconds pass by. And I understand now that when that bowl of darkness and light sped away, they only saw the darkness fleeing, not the light. They saw it in full sunlight, from the day side. Only I, from our vantage point out here, could see the bright side of the shield....

“You saved us,” the voice says again. “You great men. We'll get the bastards one day. We won't be caught twice. They'd have killed us all. It wasn't enough to steal the night, eh?

They tried to steal the day as well. Thank God for you out there.”

Now I'm too weak. I do vomit, what little of it there is in me. A mist of bitter liquid drifts.

“Sunflower, come in please?

“Sunflower, this is Earth. Are you guys okay? Is anything wrong?”

On we drift, on we drift, while Calvin raves and shouts me down.

They don't know the wonder. Only the nightmare, put to flight at last. Horror is their only truth.

I can't see anything very clearly any longer. The radio doesn't seem to work.

Oh miracle, that flew away unseen. Oh lost wonder.

But now the day is over, night is drawing nigh....

.....
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We talk about prisoners "doing time," but what if time inside prison walls was literally not the same as time outside?

Eligible for Parole After Three Hours

BY

COLEMAN BRAX

Ma didn't know I'd been planning it all along. To cut school, I mean, and to go watch Daddy serve his time. Trouble is, they don't let kids under eighteen into the vigil room. I'm twelve, but I thought maybe I could fake it.

The lawyer came to pick her up while I was still eating my corn flakes. Ma told me not to dawdle or I'd miss the school bus again. I said, "Sure. Sure." *Sure* I wasn't gonna miss the school bus. As if it's every day your daddy goes to prison!

As soon as the door slammed, I dumped the corn flakes into the sink and rushed upstairs to Ma's dressing table. No little girl make-up for me. If I was going to fake it, I'd have to do it right.

I painted my eyelids a nice blue and made those black chicken-feet under my eyes. Magenta lipstick — whooooo.

Made me look thirty-five.

I had enough bus money to get over to the Hill. Not enough to get back, but I didn't care about that. After all, it was only a four-hour sentence. Ma and Daddy would be coming home after that. So they'd have to take me with them.

I raced out of the house. Margaret and Annie and Ted saw me walk right by the school bus stop. I walked fast, hoping they wouldn't notice the make-up.

"I know where you're going," said Annie.

I turned back and smiled and waved. Annie's no mind reader; she knew because I told her. But I've got such tales I could tell about her that I can trust her with anything.

The number eight bus stops three blocks east and one block over from our house. We take it all the time to go

to the Hill. The prison's on top, surrounded by those ugly walls. But outside the gates is the best darned park in town. They've got a monkey cage, a duck pond with paddleboats, a walk-through tunnel-of-love (tell you about that some other time) and all the grass you ever want to see.

The bus driver gave me an odd look, as if he knew I wasn't supposed to be going to the park on a school day. But he didn't say anything. I went all the way to the back and sort of slumped down in my seat. It was a rotten place to ride — the engine rumbling and groaning and shaking my bones all the way to the Hill.

"End of the line!" shouted the driver.

I slinked out of my seat, dragging my purse after me. The driver had on a strange grin as I made my way down the aisle. His face was wrinkly and his hair was grey like my Uncle Rog's.

"Don't think you're the first to try it," he said. "I've been on this run for a year, and I've seen them come every Tuesday."

"I "

"Listen, girl. Why don't you just stay on the bus? I won't charge you no return fare if you stay."

"No."

"Go on. Go on." He tried to wave me back. "They won't let you in. And if they do, what'll you see? There's nothing but a TV camera up at the front of the vigil room that scans back and forth. All you see of *them* is when

they go inside and when they come out."

"But he'll see me in the monitor," I argued. "All those years inside, he'll forget what I look like. I don't want him to forget."

"It won't work, girl "

"I have to. I have to."

The driver slapped his hands against his grey slacks. He seemed resigned. "All right, all right. You try it. You see if you can do it."

I walked past him very gingerly and stepped down to the street.

"Go around to the service road," he said. "That's your best bet. Take the path around the upper rim till you come to the road."

The door hissed shut behind me, the engine grumbled, and the bus drove off. "Thanks!" I shouted at the departing wheels. Then I cupped my hand over my eyes and looked up at the top of the Hill.

The prison sat there looking unfriendly. And all around it was the big grey wall. I sure wasn't going to climb that! I thought I'd better listen to the driver's advice.

I marched up the log steps to the rim path and turned in the direction he'd pointed. I was close enough to the prison to see the vents from all the air conditioners. Daddy told me they have to have much more cooling than they would have in a normal-time prison. Its because they have to get rid of that much more heat every second. But they hadn't turned on the squeezetime

field yet, and so nothing was running.

I got around towards the back of the place, and, sure enough, there was a road leading up to a gate. The road was full of trucks! I'd never seen anything like that, but of course I'd never been there on a prison day. There were so many of them. All different sizes, with no special markings on them. The head of the line was in past the gate.

I walked over to the back of one truck and peeked inside. It looked like a grocery warehouse in there. Big cartons of this and that — bread, soup, beans. Packages of meat. Soap. Brooms. All kind of stuff.

It made sense, when I thought about it. If everything runs faster inside, then they have to bring in supplies that much faster. Even with only three or four people in the squeezetime field, it would be like supplying a town. Yep. You guessed it. On the next road over, they had a fleet of trucks waiting to haul off the refuse.

Right away, I started to scheme. I crossed the road to be on the drivers' side and began to walk nice and slow up towards the front. I tried to do it, you know, the way some of the big girls walk when they want men to whistle at them. Whooeee, it worked! There was a big white truck standing there, and when I passed it the driver wolf-whistled. "Want a lift?" he said.

"Sure." I guess he was shocked. Didn't think anyone'd want a ride into prison. Or maybe, didn't think anyone'd listen to that off-key whistle of

his. I walked past the front and around to his other door.

He had a short black beard and no hair at all on top of his head. "Are you the jolly-good grocer?" I asked as I got in.

"No, I'm Jack the Giant-killer," he said in a rough but friendly voice. "And you must be Little Red Riding Hood."

Actually, I wasn't wearing a hood, but I did have on a red skirt. I crossed my legs and let the hem ride up past my knees. Damn bony things, they are. Don't know when I'm going to get sexy ladies' knees ... if ever. I tried to see if he was looking at them, but he had dark glasses on.

"Actually, my name's Hoop," he said. (That's not his real name, but I'll call him that.)

"I'm Clair. Clair Logar."

"Glad to meet you, Clair." He held out his hand and we shook, just like men.

"Logar ... Logar ... Name sounds familiar."

Right then, I cursed my flapping tongue. I'd let my real name slip out. Why couldn't I have been born clever? "That's ... I mean "

"I got it. I got it," he said. "The cash-dispenser mystery that was in the news last winter. Some guy outwitted the banking terminals. Found a way to get back two tens for a five. Something like that "

"Yes ... but."

"It was a guy named Logar they fi-

nally convicted. I remember that now."

"Yes ... but."

"He's your dad, I bet. Going in today, isn't he?"

Right then, I nearly broke down. But I had a big stake in keeping my make-up intact, and so I held back the tears. "You ... you know he was an air .. airline pilot," I said. "He had ten years of service. Then the robopilots came and the company laid him off with just ... just a month's notice."

"Sure, Clair. I know all about it. Damned robopilots put a lot of good people out of work."

"I mean, I'm not saying it was right what he did. But the unemployment ran out and ... and"

"It's okay, Clair." He patted me on the shoulder. "I sympathize. Look. The same thing could happen to me." He pointed to the dials and switches on the dashboard. "Cruise control. Highway guidance. Crash averter. This crate nearly drives itself already. I'm studying nights to sell real estate."

I fumbled for a handkerchief to dry my leaking nose.

"Hey, now. Chin up," he said. He reached under his seat. "How about a muffin?"

"Okay."

He brought out a plastic bag. Inside were the good kind of corn muffins like Ma used to make when Daddy was still working. Sometimes he'd be away for two or three days, and when he'd come home they'd be waiting for him.

"Ummm "

"Listen. It's nearly nine," he said, glancing at his watch. "When they turn on the field, this line is going to move fast."

"What ... what happens then?"

"Put your head out the window and stare up past the gate. You'll see something looks like a conveyer belt, only it isn't."

I stuck my head out and squinted. I could make out something like a ribbon with shiny wheels along the edge.

"Y'see. It's a bit tricky to move something inside a squeezetime field. The way they do it here is with baskets that run along a track. There's a cog every couple of feet. The basket gets pushed from one cog to the next, and each jump brings it into a time zone where the cog spins faster."

"Huh? So they work up gradually, you mean?"

"That's right. The basket keeps speeding up as it eases into the field. Otherwise, you'd get a loaf of bread that's fresh on one end and stale on the other."

I wasn't sure I understood that, but my mind was on other things. "I guess you have to work fast to keep up with the baskets."

"That's the point, Clair. I'm gonna be busy. We're all gonna be busy. The guard up there at the gate is not going to have much time to check me through."

"So you think I can hide under the cartons?"

"I've been wondering when you'd get around to asking that," he said with a wink. Then he showed me where there was a space between the packages.

I stepped behind the seats and crawled inside the hole. He moved some cartons in front to cover me up. It seemed a long time that I squatted there in the dark smelling detergents and bananas and cardboard. Then, just before my feet fell asleep, a whistle blew and Mr. Hoop started his engine. I was beginning to get nervous.

I heard shouts from outside as the truck started to move. Jerk. Stop. Jerk. Stop. I heard the voice that must have been the guard's. I hadn't thought, before that moment, what Mr. Hoop stood to lose if I was caught. I would swear I was a stowaway and that he'd never known about me, but I wasn't sure that they'd believe me.

A door clanked open and a sliver of light fell on me. The guard must have been inspecting from the rear. If he looked in the wrong place ... I was pickled. I bit my fingers. I held my breath. Then the door clanged shut and the light was gone.

Jerk. The truck jerked. He'd gotten through! I was so relieved I almost fell backwards onto my thin wall of cover. I leaned the other way and did a little dance to get my circulation going again.

"Stay down!" he whispered. "Stay down till I call you."

I stayed. Then I heard him stop the

motor and pull up the brake. "Unload-ing now," he whispered. "You come out when I get to you. Make a sharp right and walk straight in through the brown door. Then you're on your own."

He started to take out the supplies. Food. Mountains of food. While I was waiting, my Daddy was eating breakfast and lunch and dinner and breakfast lunch and dinner and over and over and over It was nine fifteen maybe, and he'd already served three months of his time. I had to get to the vigil room.

Suddenly I was exposed. Mr. Hoop had pulled out the carton in front of me and I found myself staring at daylight. I duck-walked to the rear and, following his motion, hopped out of the truck. Sharp turn to the right, and I spotted the brown door.

The air was dusty. People were milling around next to the conveyer belt contraption and talking and signaling with their hands. Nobody seemed to be noticing me. I straightened myself up and stepped at a very normal pace into the doorway. I walked right in, as if I'd been going through that door all my life. I turned down a green corridor and came to a couple of signs.

SALLE D'ATTENTE. I knew what that meant. The arrow curved upwards. I climbed the staircase, followed the next sign down another green hallway. There were people sitting in offices, but they didn't seem to care about me.

Then I saw the door to it. I stopped. A monster guard in a beige uniform was standing with his back to me,

watching the entrance. Over his head was the "salle d'attente" sign in black letters. I nearly dropped my purse.

Had to think. So far the plan was moving better than I could've hoped. This last step was not going to be all that easy.

On the wall next to me was a display of photos for visitors to gawk at. Well, I was a visitor ... so I gawked. A couple of pictures showed the digging of the long trenches to bring in the special power cables. Another showed the cranes installing the field generators. Funny-looking things, those generators — like giant spindly umbrellas. That's the shape they need, I guess, to squeeze the time dimension so tight.

And whooooo. There was a picture of President Nanja. I never knew that he'd come to dedicate the place. I had to feel proud to think that we had been the very first city to get a squeezetime prison.

So I looked at the pictures some more and read all the captions. But, meanwhile, I was fumbling in my purse. Something in there had to be useful. My steno notebook from shorthand class! I pulled it out and started to take notes.

Then it happened. This six-foot blonde lady sashayed down the hall. I could smell her coming before she turned the corner. Must have dumped a whole bottle of something on herself.

I waited. The guard turned. He must have smelled her too, and I guess he liked it. They were friends! They

started talking, and I had a feeling he wouldn't take his eyes off those beautiful teeth of hers. I said to myself, "Now or never."

I flashed the shorthand pad at him, mumbled something about interviews, and walked into the room. Ma and the lawyer were sitting there with five or six other people. She opened her mouth but put her hand over it. I sat down right in back of her in a seat that had a pull-up desk arm. She turned around and gave me a look, but that was all.

Ma already had a heap of Daddy's letters in front of her. It seemed that she couldn't read them fast enough. She'd put one down, and a man would come over and hand her a few more. Except for the rustling of letters and the footsteps, it was quiet as death in there. I figured I'd better get to work.

Dear Daddy. I'm doing a class project to interview the inmates. (I hope that's the right word.) Could you please pass this letter around and ask if anyone will answer it? First of all I'd like to know who washes your laundry and who darns your socks. Can you watch TV? Do you have day and night?

I wrote a couple of letters like that and gave them to the man who was delivering Ma's mail. He came back with replies in less than a minute. That was just before the guard finished with his blonde and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Do you have proof of age, miss?" he said in a hoarse whisper that everyone could hear.

I opened my purse, took my time

looking through it.

"Sorry," I said.

"I'll have to ask you to leave, then."

"But this is my class project," I insisted. "Look!" I held out some of the letters I'd just gotten. "I'm doing interviews, see? I'm writing it all up for a report. If I don't finish, I don't know what I'll tell my teacher."

The guard was looking over my head. Someone outside was signaling to him. He forgot me, at least temporarily, and rushed outside to take care of some business. I began to collect my results.

Q: How often do you shave?

A: Once a day. Same as always. About every ten of your seconds.

Q: Do you listen to the news?

A: Not much can happen in a few hours, can it?

Q: Who does the cooking?

A: We take shifts. We do our own cleaning and washing too.

Q: What kind of educational facilities do you have?

A: Certified programs in all popular subjects. Machine-taught. Best courses available.

Q: How many guards are in with you?

A: Not guards, supervisors. One at a time. Each stays for a month ... five minutes to you.

Q: What do you see through the TV monitor?

A: Frozen faces.

Q: What do you like best about being

in there?

A: Getting a head start on the fellows outside!

Dear Daddy. I don't think I'm going to get away with staying here for your whole sentence. The guard's bound to come back soon. So if you miss me on the next scan of the camera, don't worry. I'll be waiting right outside when you get free. Maybe they'll give you time off for good behavior

Dear Clair. You can imagine my surprise when I saw you on the monitor. It's been incredibly lonely these past six months. I've been able to see Mother's face from time to time, and that's helped, but having you out there makes me feel very much stronger. I'm working hard for all of us. At my age, it's not easy to take up a new profession. Sometimes I feel I won't make it. But the teaching machines and the labs here are first-rate. With you out there rooting for me I can't fail. Please try to look up and smile the next time the camera scans you.

Naturally, the guard came back after a while. By then, I had a nice pile of letters and I'd half-filled my notepad with the results. He asked to see it. He couldn't read shorthand. So I don't think he got too much out of it. Then he said, "One half-hour more. After that you wait for your dad in the hall." I almost knocked all my letters onto

the floor.

He knew! Or maybe it was a lucky guess. I watched the clock, sent off my good-byes to Daddy, and got up just when my time came. The guard had set up a folding chair for me next to the picture gallery.

The time dragged for a while. Then something seemed to happen inside. I got up to peek in the door. The lawyer was in front of the room conferring with an official. A moment later, Daddy burst out from behind the big red door. He was smiling and was carrying a rolled-up piece of paper.

He looked thinner than he had been the night before. He'd lost some more hair too. But aside from that, it was good old Daddy. I rushed right past the guard and gave Dad a hug.

"You got out early, didn't you?" I asked. He nodded "yes" and handed me the paper.

"I couldn't have done it without you and Ma out here," he told us. The paper was a neat diploma that showed he'd completed a course in robopilot-maintenance engineering. "I never thought I'd learn to interpret the diagnostics," he said. "That was the worst of it. I used to stay up till midnight staring at the darn things. But after the first year, something clicked." He tapped the side of his head. "I came out at the top of my simulated class."

A couple of minutes later we were all outside. By then Ma had chewed me

out for skipping school and had docked me one week's allowance. I figured it was worth it, even if Daddy didn't slip me the allowance anyway. The lawyer was talking about how Dad could pay his fee in installments as soon as he started working again. He seemed optimistic about Daddy's prospects.

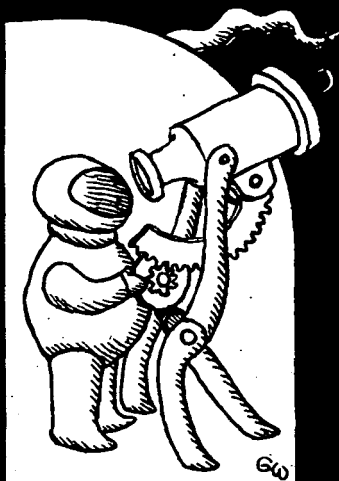
We stood around for a while longer. Then we got in the lawyer's car. He drove me to school so I could catch my afternoon classes. Daddy said he had to go see about a job.

That night, his smile was even bigger than when he'd stepped out of prison. Right away, he'd gotten a job with the airline again. And the pay was nearly as good as when he'd been a pilot.

"The job market moves fast these days," he said at dinner as he passed me the rolls. "New inventions. New procedures. You need skills that are in demand right now if you want to succeed. Luckily, I've got them."

I said I thought he was clever all right, finding out about the shortage of robopilot engineers. It takes about three years, normal time, to train a good one. The airlines are offering them bonuses, treating them like champion soccer players. My Daddy's a champion all right!

— SUBMITTED IN LIEU OF ATTENDING
ENGLISH CLASS ON TUESDAY, MAY 3
CLAIR LOGAR.



Science

ISAAC ASIMOV

TOO DEEP FOR ME

You can't always tell what hidden talents you might have. I discovered one that I had when I was at sea recently — for though I will not fly, I don't mind ships. In fact, I like ships.

As someone who is, in general, a non-traveller, I always assume that the hardships of travel, whatever they might be, would be sure to lay me low. Therefore, I was rather apprehensive about what would happen when I encountered a rough sea. To be sure, in over a dozen cruises in the course of eight years I had not encountered any, but I knew that the day was bound to come.

And then, last month, on the way back from Bermuda, the ship began to behave like an irritable bronco. At least half the passengers decided that this was the moment they were waiting for to spend a lot of time in deep thought, and they retired to their cabins to meditate. I, however, discovered in delight that the motion didn't bother me very much.

It would perhaps be less than truthful to say that I was in absolutely top form, but I ate freely and moved through the corridors (reeling somewhat from side to side as the ship rolled) light-heartedly. In fact, so jolly was I at

discovering my relative immunity to rough seas, that at one point, I burst into song.

A ship's officer, passing by, stopped and said to me, "You sound happy."
"I *am* happy," I said.

Whereupon he said, "What an inspiration you would be to the other passengers."

"No, no," I said, nervously, "don't tell them. If they find out I've been singing, they'll kill me."

So let's talk about the ocean.

Last month, we discussed air pressure in all its ramifications, and one of the ways to express the amount of pressure we feel at the bottom of the atmosphere, at sea level, is to say that standard atmospheric pressure can support a column of water 33.899 feet high. Or, to use the metric system, a column of water 10.332 meters high.

That means that if you* were to dive into the sea to a depth of 10.332 meters, you would feel the effects of two atmospheres of pressure. One of them would be due to the atmosphere which would transmit its effect through the water, and the other would be due to the water itself.

The additional atmosphere of pressure can be withstood since pearl divers routinely dive as deep as 15 meters below the surface of the sea and do so without any sort of protection. At such a depth, they experience 2.5 atmospheres of pressure, and, if all goes well while they're down there, they return to the surface in fine shape.

For every additional 10.332 meters of depth below the surface of the ocean, however, there is an additional atmosphere of pressure, and that pressure as it builds up, eventually becomes too much to handle.

In adventure stories, for instance, heroes have been known to attempt to escape pursuit by ducking under water in a pond or lake amid a clump of reeds. Such a hero can't stay under very long, of course, since he has to breathe, but our hero is a man of infinite resource. He breaks off a reed, which is hollow, tears off the top, puts one end in his mouth and allows the other to extend just above the water level where it won't be noticed among the other reeds.

He can then remain under water for a long time, breathing in this unobtrusive manner — and, in fact, in all the adventure stories I've ever read or viewed in which the hero uses this ruse, he succeeds in escaping.

**You, not I. I'm a creature of the surface. Any depth is too deep for me.*

As a matter of fact, alligators and hippopotamuses make use of a trick much like this. Their nostrils are placed in bulges at the top of their snouts. They can remain just about completely submerged in water with only their nostrils above water.

But then, how far can we go in this fashion? Can we prowl around the bottom of lakes in comfort simply by making use of a nice wide plastic tube long enough to reach the surface — and breathing through it.

No, we can't go too far with this sort of thing. First, the longer and, therefore, the more voluminous the tube, the less likely we are to be breathing fresh air.

Suppose you suck in a deep breath through the tube and fill your lungs. Next you breathe out. Some of the air you exhale doesn't reach the top of the tube. In fact, the tube is filled with exhaled air. When you breathe in, fresh air will enter the tube, but it can't enter the lungs till you have inhaled all the exhaled air that was in the tube.

If the tube is long enough and wide enough, *all* the exhaled air remains in that long tube, and it is all you will get when you inhale again. You will breathe the same air over and over again, and it will not be long until you suffocate. If you make the tube thin, to keep the volume down, you won't be able to suck air in fast enough and you will suffocate anyway.

There is a second objection to the breathing-through-a-tube trick. The air you pull in through a tube is at ordinary air pressure; the water outside your body presses in with a pressure equal to air pressure, plus the pressure of the water itself, a pressure that depends upon your depth below the surface.

This means that there is excess pressure pushing your chest inward and, in inhaling, you have to expand your chest cavity against that pressure. If you're deep enough, the water pressure becomes so high that you simply cannot expand your chest against it. In that case, you cannot inhale and you suffocate.

But then why leave the air at its ordinary pressure? Suppose you must work at the bottom of a river, as when you are constructing the foundations of a bridge. One way of doing it would be to construct something like a bucket, which is put into the water, open end down. The water comes in but does not fill the bucket, of course. There is trapped air inside which is compressed by the incoming water until it exerts the same pressure downward that the water exerts upward.

What's more, you can push the water out of the bucket altogether if you pump more air into the bucket, air that is compressed to the point

where it possesses the pressure of the water.

If you imagine a kind of inlet into the bucket through which workmen can enter, you have a "pneumatic caisson."

Workers must be subjected by stages to more and more air pressure until they are at the pressure under which they will be working. The reason for the gradual increase in air pressure is to allow the pressure within the tissues of the body to equalize. Once the equalization has taken place, the caisson workers can move about freely, unaware of the additional pressure upon their bodies.

And yet there are difficulties. To see what those are, we have to consider what happens when air passes from our lungs into our body. The air doesn't do so as gaseous air; we can't use gases as gases.

What happens is that the air dissolves in the fluid layer coating the tiny vacuoles of the lung and, in solution, diffuses across the thin membrane and the thin capillary membrane, passing, in this way, into the bloodstream. The dissolved gases are carried by the bloodstream to the tens of billions of cells in the body, and at each of those cells, the dissolved gases diffuse into the cells for possible use.

Air is not, however, a pure substance, and it does not dissolve as a single material. It consists of different gases, and each gas dissolves to a different extent.

The four chief gases of dry air, and their percentage by volume, are as follows:

<i>gas</i>	<i>percent by volume</i>
nitrogen	78.084
oxygen	20.946
argon	0.934
carbon dioxide	0.033

Various gases present in trace quantities make up the remaining 0.003 percent. In addition there are variable quantities of water vapor in the air as well as various kinds of dust particles. None of this is important in the following discussion and we will stick to the four gases.

Suppose a pure sample of each of the four gases is thoroughly mixed with 100 milliliters (6.1 cubic inches) of pure water at 0° C. and one atmosphere pressure. How much of each gas will dissolve? Here is the answer in milliliters which will measure the amount dissolved as percent by volume.

<i>gas</i>	<i>percent dissolved by volume</i>
nitrogen	2.33
oxygen	4.80
argon	5.60
carbon dioxide	171.3

This doesn't look so bad. Water can dissolve 1/50 of its own volume of nitrogen, about 1/20 of its volume of either oxygen or argon, and nearly twice its volume of carbon dioxide.

It isn't entirely fair, however, to compare volumes of water with volumes of gas. Water is a liquid and quite dense, while nitrogen and the others are gases and very rarefied in comparison. While 100 milliliters of water weigh 100 grams, 100 milliliters of nitrogen weigh only 0.125 grams. Consequently, instead of measuring solubility as percent by volume, thus giving an unfairly impressive advantage to the gases, let us measure it as percent by weight.

How many grams of each gas will dissolve, under the conditions earlier expressed, in 100 grams of water. The answer is:

<i>gas</i>	<i>percent dissolved by weight</i>
nitrogen	0.0029
oxygen	0.0068
argon	0.0100
carbon dioxide	0.339

Those are the results, remember, when a different batch of pure water is each mixed with a pure sample of a different one of these gases. Air is not, however, a pure gas, but a mixture of gases that all compete for a chance to dissolve. The larger the percentage of a particular gas in the air, the greater the chance of its dissolving, and the closer it approaches to its total solubility.

If a fresh batch of water is well-mixed with a sample of air, then allowing for the various percentages of its components, 100 grams of water will contain:

<i>gas</i>	<i>percent dissolved out of air, by weight</i>
nitrogen	0.0023
oxygen	0.0014
argon	0.0001
carbon dioxide	0.0001

This certainly doesn't seem like much. Cold water, well mixed with air, ends up with one gram of oxygen for every 70,000 grams of water, and fish have to live on that small quantity of dissolved oxygen. They have to suck a lot of water past their gills to get enough oxygen out of it to fulfill their energy needs. But they manage.

As the temperature goes up, the solubility of all gases, including oxygen, goes *down*. At 25° C. (77° F.), 100 grams of water will hold only 0.00081 grams of oxygen, only 5/9 of what it holds at 0° C. That puts fish, and sea-life generally, under an additional strain, and it is not surprising that the cold polar seas are considerably richer in sea-life than the warm tropical seas.

Nor need we feel blessed because we live directly on the oxygen in the air, because in a way, we don't. The oxygen is no good to us until it dissolves in the thin film of water that lines the vacuoles of our lungs, and that water is at a temperature of 37° C. We are nowhere near as lucky as the polar fish, and we can thank our efficiency at quickly dissolving the oxygen and as quickly sucking it out into our red blood corpuscles for our ability to live.

Solubility of gases also varies directly with pressure. If air is compressed to five times its normal density and pressure, as would be true for people working in a caisson 41 meters below the water surface (or for people diving that far down in a scuba apparatus) then each gaseous component of the air would dissolve in five times the quantity it would in the normal pressure of sea-level air.

This can cause problems.

Since air is 1/5 oxygen, five atmospheres of air pressure produces the equivalent of one atmosphere of oxygen. That much oxygen would, eventually, produce serious results due to "oxygen toxicity," and this is something that must be watched for.

Again, there is a tendency at high pressures to resist breathing. One presumably gets a feeling of weariness at having to push that dense air in and

out of the lungs especially when one gets the feeling one has enough oxygen with shallow breathing. This does stave off oxygen toxicity, but it results in the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the body, which produces "carbon dioxide intoxication" with symptoms such as headache, dizziness and worse. This, too, contributes to limiting the length of time people can work in caissons.

The matter of nitrogen or argon would seem to be benign. The body has no occasion to use either. Our body fluids hold both gases in solution at all times; they don't bother the body and the body doesn't bother it.

If under compression, the body fluids hold, say, five times the normal quantity of dissolved nitrogen and argon, that still isn't much in an absolute sense and we might expect it wouldn't be bothersome. Yet it could be.

At quite high compressions, the dissolved nitrogen can produce "nitrogen narcosis" which produces euphoria, overconfidence, and a decline in mental ability and in judgment. This is a very dangerous combination, and it is, in fact, very similar in its effect to alcoholic intoxication. Divers who penetrate too far below the ocean surface are apt to experience what Jacques Cousteau calls "rapture of the deep," and the resulting carelessness may lead to a happy death.

Argon may produce similar results but it is present in only 1/20 the quantity of nitrogen and it can be ignored.

The most serious problem that arises in compressed-air work or play, comes when people who have been subjected to compressed air are brought back to normal pressures.

As the air pressure diminishes, the body fluids can hold less and less nitrogen in solution. The nitrogen must diffuse out of the cells through the cell membranes, into the blood stream (which carries its own excess) and then out of the body by way of the lungs. This can be done without harm but it is a slow process.

Fortunately, the nitrogen is slow in coming out of solution in the first place. Even if the body is brought back to normal pressure so quickly that the excess nitrogen has not had time to bleed off, it continues to come out slowly and ooze out of the body safely. When people have not been exposed to too great a pressure of compressed air, decompression can take place at the rate that original compression took, with pressure in and out equalizing and no problem arising from the nitrogen excess.

As time went on, however, people worked at deeper and deeper levels under more and more air-compression and built up higher and higher levels

of nitrogen-excess in their tissues.

When that happened it became possible for decompression to be too rapid. The nitrogen would come out of solution too rapidly for diffusion to get rid of it. The nitrogen would accumulate in tiny bubbles, which could do enormous harm.

If the bubbles formed in the joints and around nerves, they could produce agonizing pain. In the blood, they could suffocate. In the spinal cord, they could paralyze. In the brain, they could cause blindness or convulsions. If the condition were bad enough it could do permanent damage, or kill. The symptoms could set in anywhere from one to 18 hours after decompression, and the condition is called "decompression sickness," "caisson disease" or "the bends."

When caisson work first plunged to significantly great depths, decompression sickness became the scourge of underwater construction. The first large steel bridge was the Eads Bridge built between 1867 and 1874 over the Mississippi River at St. Louis. It was named for its builder, James Buchanan Eads (1820-1887). To sink the foundations, excavations had to be made to the then unprecedented depth of 30 meters. There were about 600 men engaged, and 119 had bad cases of "decompression sickness." Fourteen of them died.

Then, between 1869 and 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge, connecting Manhattan and Brooklyn, was built. It was the first of the great suspension bridges, and almost everything about it was experimental.

The man in charge of the construction was Washington Augustus Roebling (1837-1926), the son of the designer who was killed in an accident at the very beginning of the construction.

Despite precautions, more than a hundred cases of decompression sickness resulted, and one of the casualties was Roebling himself. Roebling, a totally dedicated person, insisted on supervising every facet of the project whatever the dangers involved. At one point he remained for twelve consecutive hours in a caisson and when he finally lapsed into unconsciousness, he was brought to the surface — too quickly.

Decompression sickness permanently damaged his body. He was confined to his apartment, which overlooked the site where the bridge was being built. From there, he watched and supervised the construction, with his wife serving as his mobile unit, carrying orders to the engineers and foremen and bringing back reports. He lived to see the Brooklyn Bridge completed and for forty-three years more, but never recovered his health completely.

The proper way of treating or preventing decompression sickness was first suggested in 1907 by John B. S. Haldane (1892-1964).

He suggested that people decompress in stages. It is usually safe to reduce the pressure to no less than one-half its previous value at some reasonable speed, but then people must stay at that pressure until the nitrogen in the body fluids has reached a new and lower equilibrium. Then the pressure is reduced another stage and there is another wait and so on. It is a tedious method, but anyone who has witnessed what decompression sickness can do to a person would rather go through the tedium any number of times than have decompression sickness once.

If through carelessness or accident, decompression has been too fast and the symptoms of decompression sickness begin to appear, a person must be placed under compressed air at once, to dissolve the gas bubbles once again and then decompression by stages can take place.

One possible way of avoiding the ill effects of compressed air is to replace the nitrogen with some other gas that would be even more inert than nitrogen and therefore less dangerous in various ways. The obvious choice was helium.

Helium is the most inert of all substances. It is so inert that it resists even solution, so that it is the least soluble of all known gases. Thus, 100 milliliters of water will dissolve 0.94 milliliters of helium, only $\frac{2}{5}$ of the volume of nitrogen it will dissolve.

This looks hopeful since it means that if bubbles form during decompression, the volume of helium bubbles formed would be only $\frac{2}{5}$ that of the nitrogen bubbles formed under similar conditions and that should produce correspondingly less damage.

Unfortunately, that is not all there is to the story. Helium's greater inertness and its smaller atoms makes it readier than nitrogen to leave the solution. This means that though there is less bubbling in the case of helium, the bubbles form faster, and the two tendencies largely cancel each other. Helium does not, therefore, liberate people from the fear of decompression sickness. In fact, decompression in the case of helium/oxygen mixtures must take place by smaller stages than in the case of nitrogen/oxygen mixtures. (I suspect, however, that helium reaches equilibrium faster so that the stay at each stage is shorter, and that is a good thing.)

Helium has advantages that have nothing to do with decompression sickness. Helium has only $\frac{1}{9}$ the intoxicating effects of nitrogen so that one can go deeper without danger of suicidal "rapture." Then, too, helium

is one-seventh as dense as nitrogen. Air in which helium replaces nitrogen is only a third as dense as ordinary air. This reduces the viscosity of compressed air and makes it less difficult to push it in and out of the lungs. People breathe more readily and the chance of carbon dioxide intoxication is lowered. For these reasons the use of helium does make it safe to go to depths beyond those where one can go with ordinary compressed air. Helium is used for scuba divers who intend to spend considerable time below 45 meters.

Whereas divers breathing ordinary compressed air dare not sink below 90 meters for even brief intervals, helium has made it possible to go down to 150 meters for considerable periods and to still greater depths under special conditions.

Yet all these divers represent only the skin of the ocean. Even a depth of 150 meters is less than $1/70$ the greatest depth of the ocean.

What is the pressure at the great depths?

That depends upon temperature, salinity, currents, compressibility, but the heck with that. We can get reasonably close if we merely start with one atmosphere for the air itself and then add another atmosphere for every 10.332 meters.

The greatest depth of the ocean is to be found in the Marianas Trench in the Pacific, where a depth of 11,033 meters (about 6.9 miles) has been reported. There the water pressure would be something like 1,070 atmospheres. To see what that means in a familiar unit — water pressure at the bottom of the deepest trench is equal to 7.85 tons per square inch.

It would seem, if we didn't know better, that life would be impossible under such conditions, but of course, that's not so. Life has been found at all depths in the ocean, even in the lowest. Internal and external pressures balance and that's what counts.

We won't leave the subject, though, without giving the water pressure in the deepest trench in the metric system. The maximum water pressure in the ocean is:

	1,084,000,000 dynes per square centimeter,
or	1,084 bars
or	1,084,000 millibars
or	108,400,000 newtons per square meter
or	108,400,000 pascals.

And this isn't the largest pressure you can find under natural circumstances on Earth — but that is something I will discuss next month. 

Susan C. Petrey died suddenly on December 5, 1980; she was in her mid-thirties. Her first sale was "Spareen Among the Tartars," (September 1979), followed by "Spidersong," (September 1980). The story you are about to read is another tale about Spareen and his Varkela people; we have one further story in the series in inventory. Miss Petrey's letters in response to our request for biographical information were modest in the extreme, and so we know little about her except that she was a wonderfully talented new writer whose loss will be felt by anyone familiar with her work.

Spareen Among the Cossacks

BY SUSAN C. PETREY

S

pareen, the Varkela leechman, shifted his weight in the saddle as he paused to survey the Cossack fort at Groznoi. To the east, high walls made of perpendicular logs jutted skyward against the flat blue horizon of the steppe. To the south its irregular perimeter marked a huge gap in the distant white teeth of the Caucasus Mountains. The golden-eyes mare lowered her head to pick at small yellow flowers of toadflax among the tall grasses, oblivious to his concern. He wondered why his brother, Vaylance, had so urgently summoned him here. For a healing? For help in dreamwalking? Or perhaps out of sheer loneliness for one of his own kind in his self-imposed exile here among the Cossacks.

Spareen's thin, hollow blood-teeth slipped involuntarily out of their little niches in his upper jaw. He quickly retracted them again, like cat's claws. It

would never do to let the Cossacks see those, with their silly superstitions. People like Spareen, who came out at night and drank human blood, were viewed with suspicion among the slavs, even though Varkela were only honest leechmen, collecting the proper fee for a healing from a carefully placed bite on arm or leg.

He wondered how Vaylance fared here among the Russians and Cossacks, who might call a leechman *vampire* if he were indiscreet in collecting the *blood-price*. Enough worrying about that, thought Spareen, whose were-teeth ached hungrily in his jaw. Vaylance must be receiving some form of payment, or he wouldn't have survived here so long.

To the untrained eye, Spareen could have appeared a Tartar, but any Tartar would recognize him as Varkela by the way he tied his ink-black hair

back in a tail, and by his white doe-skin shirt and trousers. He was a hulking big fellow with large hands and feet, handsome in a rustic sort of way, slightly oriental about the eyes, but with a nose straight as a plowshare.

He gave his mare a nudge with his calves to let her know that he'd finished his contemplations, but instead of proceeding to the fort, she reached around and tugged with her teeth at his faded, doe-skin trousers and fixed him with those all-too-knowing golden eyes.

"Now don't make any trouble for yourself here," she admonished him in the horse language that only the Varkela understand.

"Make trouble? And how might I do that?" asked Spareen mildly.

"You know what I mean. So don't waste that innocent look on me. The last time we came in from the steppe, you got drunk, got into a fight, and almost lost the nomad yurt you sleep in over some silly wager. Your temper will be the ruination of both of us," said the mare.

"I suppose you're right," sighed Spareen. "Ever since that she-witch Varkura dumped me, I've been out of sorts."

"You shouldn't be so hot-headed, Spareen. Learn to talk your way out of a fight. Last month you were so banged-up, you needed more doctoring than most of your patients."

"Not half as banged-up as that fellow was when I threw him through the pot-house wall," Spareen smirked, re-

membering. "But you're right. If some Cossack did punch me out and happened to take a look in my mouth, then I'd really be in trouble. So for your sake and mine, I shall keep a tight rein on my temper. Does that satisfy you?"

"Only if you mean it," said the mare, but she let go of his pant leg and set off for the fort gate at a jog-trot. The evening sun reddened on the horizon like a bullet wound. A plover took wing in front of them, keening plaintively, and settled in a hummock of sage farther on.

"You're a fine one to advise me," said Spareen. "Didn't I raise you from a foal and suckle you on a sponge?" But he knew it was wasted breath, for if she deigned to answer at all, she would only say that horses age faster than men and are therefore wiser.

They passed unchallenged at the sentry box and entered the stanitz, passing Cossack houses raised up on stilts to avoid the spring flooding of the river Terek. This late in summer they resembled boat docks at low water and were connected by footbridge galleries that ran above the hard-packed dirt streets.

Of the many buildings, one was a large one-story with windows placed high up. Surely this was the infirmary his brother had described. Spareen dismounted, unhooked his saddlebags and checked the tools of his trade: a pharmacopoeia of herbs, two needles, two little scalpels of German steel, and a small tin biscuit box holding a bit of

moldy bread dough. Slinging the bags over his shoulder, he bounded up the steps, two at a time, and knocked at the door.

A robust, red-faced Russian with greying hair and eyebrows answered the knock, and Spareen asked for his brother in the best of his Tartar-accented Russian.

"Spareen!" a voice cried from within the depths of the house, and a thin, scholarly young man with a pince-nez perched on his plowshare nose pushed past the Russian, flung himself on Spareen and kissed him. Vaylance was half a head shorter than Spareen, built on a more delicate scale, with small, deft hands, skilled to bind up wounds with small, neat stitches. He wore his dark, ragged locks trimmed to the collar after the manner of the Russian soldiers, and one would have hardly thought that he and Spareen were brothers, except for that nose and those dark eyes that glowed with a certain mysterious inner light of their own.

When Vaylance hugged him, Spareen could not resist the temptation to poke his elder brother in the ribs. Ticklish as ever, Vaylance flinched and swatted Spareen's shovel-sized paw away.

"Do I take it that you two know each other?" asked the ruddy-faced Russian with an amused grin.

"Forgive me," said Vaylance. "This is my brother, Spareen — I told you he'd come — and this," he said indicating the Russian, "Is Dr. Vladimir Ivan-

ovitch Rimsky, my instructor in the science of medicine."

"He's being modest," said the sanguine Rimsky, putting an arm around Vaylance's thin shoulders. "I learn more from Vaylance about the Varkela art of healing than he does from me about the 'science of medicine.' He works more cures than I do around this place. I don't know what I'd do without him."

He turned to Vaylance. "Get your brother settled in your quarters and you can explain to him our problem."

Spareen followed Vaylance back into the depths of the house, past a room full of occupied cots, the infirmary, and past a small room leaking sharp chemical and mild herbal odors, the pharmacy. Vaylance's room was small and dark, a comfort to nocturnal Varkela eyes. A single candle burned in a niche before an icon showing the madonna and child surrounded by wild animals in varying poses of adoration, Grushnitsky's "Virgin of the Beasts."

"I dreamed your soul-beast yesterday," said Spareen, recalling the regal stag poised as if for flight near the edge where the steppe meets woodland. "Was it a sending?"

"It was," said Vaylance. "I sent for you because I need your help in a healing. The Russian colonel Barikoff lies ill with putrescent ulcers on his leg that won't heal, and yesterday he became feverish. I've tried all my knowledge of herbal febrifuges, even the Peruvian fe-

ver bark, to no avail. Healer's touch brings him some relief from pain, and moments of consciousness, but it soon passes and I fear for his life."

"Then I suppose you will be wanting to try the mold-cure," said Spareen, thinking grimly of the last time he'd been called upon to perform this type of a healing.

"Precisely," said Vaylance. "Do you have the mold starter with you?"

"I do," said Spareen. "I always come prepared for the worst." He took out the precious tin box containing the mold that his family had nurtured and nursed for generations, a special, potent strain, rapid-growing if given a special food and dormant for months if stored correctly.

"I suppose I must begin then," sighed Spareen, prying off the lid. He heated his scalpel in the candle flame, allowed it to cool, and carefully extracted a portion of the bread dough. This he placed in his mouth and began to chew and mix with saliva until he had a soupy mess. then he sucked the mixture up into his hollow blood-teeth. He could feel the stuff settle in the reservoir of his naso-dental sinuses where the blood that he normally ingested would be strained for antibodies before entering his blood stream. Spareen's reluctance to do the mold-cure was based on the fact that pressure from the mold's growth caused terrible sinus headaches. But the process produced a precious healing liquor which could be injected into the pa-

tient via the retractable Varkelan blood-teeth.

"When you start to feel a headache coming on," said Vaylance, "take a little wine into your stomach. I'll put my hands on your face and draw out the pain."

A good idea, thought Spareen, who somewhat envied Vaylance's gift of healer's touch. Pity I was the only one in the family with stout enough constitution to withstand the ravages of the mold-cure, he mused. The worst part of it was that while the damn stuff was lodged in his sinuses, he couldn't take blood. It had been a week since his last payment from the Nogai tatars, and he ached for the thick red juice of life. This thinking led him to a question.

"Vaylance, how do they pay you here? Surely the Russians and Cossacks don't pay you the blood-price as the Tartars do."

"No," said Vaylance. "I have to resort to a mild form of subterfuge. After the patient is well enough, I invite him back for a quiet cup of tea and one last 'examination', and if he should happen to fall asleep and awaken with an insect bite in the nook of the arm, he is not much alarmed. It makes me feel somewhat dishonest, but Rimsky won't have it any other way. He fears the superstitious would misunderstand and take me for a vampire — which reminds me, Spareen — while you are here, do not do anything that might draw undo attention to yourself, or re-

veal our peculiar nature. My position here depends on it. I can't afford to be found out."

"I understand," said Spareen and mustered up his good intentions. Outbloods were so gullible, it was easy to take advantage of them, especially in matters concerning wagers on horses, but he would restrain himself. Considering the headache he would have, he would probably not feel up to any foolery.

"You must also understand," said Vaylance, "that this cure may be crucial to my staying here. You see, for the past year, Rimsky has provided for my support; and an army surgeon doesn't make that much. My hope is that if we heal this Barikoff, he can provide a bit of money for my upkeep here so that I can continue to study outblood medicine with Rimsky and teach him the ways of our people."

"We will have to wait and see," said Spareen. "The mold-cure doesn't always work, you know."

"I know," said Vaylance. "You lost one of your Tartars last time, didn't you?"

"True. Soodshi-Noyon, the Kalmuck chieftain died under my hands of the same thing you describe — except the pus from his wound was foul green and strange-smelling. How does the colonel's wound look?"

"Yellow drainage. The usual pus odor."

"It sounds hopeful then. I'd better make a solution of water and corn

flour and suck it up to feed the mold. It usually takes a day and a half before I'm ready. Let's go have a look at the patient."

The two brothers took the footbridge that passed over the wheel-rutted, hard-packed street, crossing to the officers' quarters. Rimsky was already present when Spareen followed his brother into the bare-beamed sick-room. He noted that a large earthen stove filled one corner of the room, and nestled in a niche of the chimney a samovar hissed cheerfully. But the room was dominated by a huge Russian krovat, a high, narrow couch-like bed, richly carved and cushioned, where a wax-skinned, unshaven older man lay propped up with one leg slung over the side to rest on a footstool. The inhabitant of the bed did not appear to be conscious, and Rimsky was squatting on the floor, his paunch protruding like a bullfrog's, dabbing with a napkin at the angry raw flesh bordering the ulcer. A buttery pustulence oozed from the center, drying into crusts, and the red outline of an inflamed vein could be seen leading away from the excrescence toward the heart, — a very bad sign indeed. But the most unsettling aspect for Spareen was a slight greenish discoloration in the crusts at the edge of one of the ulcers. He pointed this out to Vaylance saying:

"The ulcer on the leg of Soodshi-Noyon began to green in a similar manner."

"Strange," said Vaylance. "I didn't notice it yesterday."

"When will this mold-cure of yours be ready?" asked Rimsky, standing up and discarding the discolored rag in a basin."

"Spareen says a day and a half," said Vaylance. "I'm afraid all we can do is wait until then. I hope he can hold on that long."

The remainder of that evening, Spareen spent following Rimsky and Vaylance on their rounds. The Russian methods of healing were not that much different in many respects from the usual Varkela treatment. A major difference was that the Russian doctor had many metal tools for a variety of surgeries. Spareen cast covetous eyes on the bone cutter. With such a tool, he could amputate unsalvageable limbs with much less trauma. What he wouldn't have given for one of those when he had served as medic to a Circassian tribe in one of their innumerable wars against the Cossacks back in '39.

And this fellow Rimsky wasn't the usual condescending European-trained doctor. He seemed to have a lot of respect for the Varkela way of healing, even to the extent of having Vaylance teach him about the flow of *ki* energy in touch healing and the controlling of pain with Chinese needles.

Vaylance stopped to joke with one of the patients, his small, deft fingers kneading the pressure points along the spine. It was good to see Vaylance happy again after that long bout with mel-

ancholia. There were those of his people who thought him a bit addled — it was Favarka, her death that did it, they said — for here he was healing among the Cossacks, taking instruction from a Russian doctor rather than from an esteemed shaman of the steppe and, worse, accepting the religion of the cross-worshippers, anathema to the Varkela. But Spareen knew his brother wasn't crazy, and apparently life at the fort agreed with him, for his color was good, not like one who suffers from blood-need.

Rimsky retired at midnight, leaving the two brothers to talk until dawn. When the sun showed in the east, they drew hot water for tea from Rimsky's battered old pot-bellied samovar and retired to Vaylance's darkened room to take their daytime sleep.

Vaylance arose at 4:00 in the afternoon, an indecent hour to Spareen, whose head was beginning to feel heavy and hot from the mold-cure. He could hear his brother moving about the room. He cringed at the scrape of a chair and ground his teeth at the small clicking and tinkling noises of something being stirred in a glass bottle. Damned inconsiderate of Vaylance to be up so early, banging around.

Rimsky appeared in the doorway. "Is the laudanum ready?" he asked. "Our amputee, Orloff, is in much pain."

"It's ready," said Vaylance. "Would you like me to go and sit up with the colonel tonight? You must be

awfully tired."

"No," said Rimsky, "because tonight Dimitry has invited you to a party at Ustenka's, and I insist that you attend."

"A party? Me? That's thoughtful of him," said Vaylance.

"You're not going to leave me here to suffer while you go to a party, are you?" moaned Spareen after Rimsky left the room.

"Of course not. You're coming with me."

Spareen moaned even louder at that.

"Come on," said Vaylance, laying a cool hand on the bridge of Spareen's nose. "I have to go. This is a first for me. The Russian soldiers and the Cossacks don't usually invite me to their social gatherings. Perhaps they've finally decided to accept me in spite of my Tartar taint."

Beginning to feel a bit better, Spareen sat up. Vaylance's cool fingers seemed to suck out the pain like small mouths.

"You worry about what a bunch of Cossacks think of you?"

"Not that so much," said Vaylance, "but it has been lonely here. This Dimitry — I cured his horse of lameness — he's the first friend I've made here, except for Rimsky."

At 7:00 p.m. Dimitry, a burly, blond Russian with clean-shaven boyish cheeks, arrived, and Vaylance asked if Spareen might also come to the party.

"I'll dress him like a proper Rus-

sian," Vaylance promised. "That way people won't accuse you of being too friendly with the Tartars."

"I'm sure Ustenka won't mind," said Dimitry. "She was asking earlier who that handsome Tartar was, who rode in this evening. Just tell your brother not to run off with my Ustenka. I hope to run off with her myself this evening."

A thought tickled at the edge of Spareen's mind. If there were women at this party who could be witched, perhaps he'd have a bit of fun. And if there were one among them who was wolf-minded — that is, if she would not come when he witched her with his dark Varkela eyes — then she was an equal, and he might pursue that one even more. He felt a vague stirring in the roots of his belly fur and pulled himself up short in his thinking. He was, after all, here to help Vaylance in a healing and he'd promised — no foolishness.

He followed Vaylance back to his room to dress.

"Here, wear these trousers of mine." Vaylance offered him tight-fitting Russian pants. "I'll see if Rimsky can spare you a shirt. You're too big in the shoulders to fit anything of mine."

Vaylance left the room. A few minutes later he returned, bearing a white cotton shirt with a ruffle down the front.

"Will there be women at this party?" asked Spareen.

"Of course," said Vaylance. "But

don't get your hopes up. As long as I've been here, I've yet to meet one woman who's wolf-minded. But, tell me, how is your relationship with that Tartar lady coming?"

"Like this and like that," said Spareen. "She's not the least bit wolfish, but if we could get a child, I'd marry her. So far I've wasted enough of my seed on her to raise up an army. And you know how father is. When he found out I was seeing an outblood, I thought he was going to cut off my cock and ship me to Constantinople in leg irons."

"Father's a smart old wolf. He knows where you go when you sneak off during the daytime"

"How come you never got caught?" asked Spareen.

"Oh, but I did," said Vaylance. "My career was not quite as illustrious as yours, Spareen. I only got laid twice before I got married, and both times father gave me the lecture about not wasting our seed on the outblood whores with whom we cannot get children."

"He's a hypocrite. Our own sister is a half-blood out of a Cossack woman."

"A wolf-minded Cossack woman, don't forget." Vaylance fussed with the collar at Spareen's throat.

"But that's the whole point," said Spareen. "What do they expect us to do with so few wolf-minded women around."

"You might ask father to arrange a courtship for you. Surely there must be

a woman of the blood looking for an extra husband. What about Varkura over in the Nogai territory?"

Spareen's throat constricted at the unhappy memory. "We tried her already. She turned me down. Valkeen said she'd take me in three years. But what do I do in the meantime?"

"My poor brother. How you suffer!" said Vaylance in mock sympathy.

"That's fine for you to say. You got married off at 17 and to someone wolf-minded too." Spareen realized he shouldn't have mentioned this, for he saw the old sadness come into Vaylance's eyes, but the sadness slipped away as quickly as it had come, and Vaylance said:

"All I can tell you is that some day a Varkela woman, or perhaps a wolf-minded outblood, will ride through your territory, and your heart will mount up and ride after her into the fullness of joy. That's all I can say. Now button down those cuffs — there you are. Let's go."

When they went out to meet Dimitry, Vaylance stopped to confer a moment with Rimsky. "Send for me and I will come if anyone is in much pain. I have my Chinese needles with me in my pocket." He patted his waistcoat where a small bulge protruded.

They descended the steps to the boardwalk and made their way between houses down into the street. The Milky Way spread across the sky like a dusting of corn flour on black bread. On the wind came the aroma of flow-

ers neatly planted in boxes in front of some of the houses, and occasionally the odor of a chicken coop.

"What's this mysterious illness that keeps you from going out in the daytime?" Dimitry asked of Vaylance.

Spareen almost laughed out loud, but caught his brother's warning glance and smothered the impulse.

"I don't know the name of it," said Vaylance. "Something long and scientific. Dr. Rimsky knows it. It makes my eyes very sensitive to light, so that I prefer to sleep days."

"Yet you seem quite well most of the time."

"Fortunately," said Vaylance, "it's not a severe case. My brother has the same affliction."

Clever of Vaylance, thought Spareen, to explain his nocturnal habits in such a manner.

When they reached the house where Ustenka and her mother lived, the party was already in progress. An attractive young Cossack woman with auburn hair greeted them at the door.

"Ustenka, may I present our surgeon's assistant, Vaylance, and his brother Spareen," said Dimitry.

Ustenka nodded and raised her eyes to meet Spareen's. The eyes of a sheep, he thought, and although she was pretty, his finely tuned Varkela nose brought him the flat smell of an out-blood woman, nothing of interest here.

She invited them in and was introducing them around when Spareen noticed a red-bearded Cossack eyeing

them with contempt.

"Who's that?" he asked his brother.

"Ivan Stepanovitch," said Vaylance. "He's a rude lout, always looking for a fight. Don't let anything he says provoke you, Spareen. I know how to handle him."

They sat down at the table across from Ivan, for there was no other place to sit. Ustenka brought them cups of Chikkur, the local red wine, and a large bowl of strawberries and clotted cream. Spareen declined the strawberries, but downed a cup of the wine.

"So, your brother is a drinker," cried Dimitry, slapping Spareen on the back. "Another round over here, Ustenka."

The red-bearded Cossack studied them thoughtfully, stroking the bandoliers on the front of his coat, and then turned to one of his fellows and said quite loudly, so that Vaylance and his friends might overhear, "Is it true that our esteemed surgeon's assistant is really a smelly goat-doctor from the steppe?"

There was a painful lull in the conversation. Spareen's anger impelled him to reach down and pull a knife from his boot, but before he could bring it above table level, he felt Vaylance's small hand grip his wrist like a manacle. He saw that Vaylance's other hand restrained Dimitry's balled fist.

"Quite true," Vaylance addressed the onlookers. "I practiced on the smelly goats, that I might learn better how to care for Cossack soldiers."

Everyone laughed good-naturedly at this and the uncomfortable tension passed. Vaylance whispered, "You two young hot heads could have provoked a duel. Show a little more sense."

But red-bearded Ivan seemed determined to needle the newcomers. He produced a balalaika, strummed a few chords and said:

"I have studied the Tartars for many years, and I've found that they are a genteel folk, as will be evidenced by this Tartar song that I'm about to sing for you." And he began to sing Russian words to a tune that he must have devised himself, for it was no Tartar song:

I'm a Tartar, a mean and evil
Tartar
And I leave a trail of red behind.
I take delight in stirring up a fight,
And roasting little babies on a bun
Till they're done.

I'm a Tartar, a mean and nasty
Tartar.
I smell like uncle Ivan's dirty socks.
I drink kumiss and the water that I
piss.
When I want a wench I beat her in
the head
Till she's dead.

Spareen felt insulted by this but, inhibited by Vaylance's presence, decided to retaliate in song rather than fisticuffs. He reached across the table, borrowed the instrument from Ivan and said:

"I've studied the Cossacks for many years, and I've observed that they are such a cultured folk that no one can outdo them at gentility." He strummed a tune on the balalaika and raised his mighty baritone in song:

I'm a Cossack and I stink
From the vodka that I drink
And the urine that I use
For my oblations.

I'm a lazy lout.
People know, without a doubt,
Screwing donkeys is
My only occupation.

Ivan Stepanovitch's hand strayed to the rapier that hung at his side. "Say that again, Tartar," he snarled.

"Wait, wait ... you misunderstood my brother," Vaylance interposed. "You see, he used a Tartar word in that song. The Tartar meaning of 'screw' is 'to brush'. So, you see, what Spareen meant to say was, 'brushing donkeys is my only occupation.'"

"There's no such word in Tartar," muttered Spareen, under his breath.

"You'd better pretend there is," Vaylance whispered back. "Remember, Spareen, I will be held accountable for your behavior."

Ivan Stepanovitch threw back his head and laughed, his teeth marking a white line between his fiery beard and mustache.

"I'll forgive you this time," he said, "if you'll promise not to foul our fair

mother-tongue with Tartar words that sound like profanities."

At that moment a soldier came into the house and looked around the room until he spied the table where Vaylance was sitting. He pushed his way through the crowded tables, and said:

"The doctor needs your assistance."

Vaylance stood and excused himself. Before leaving, he warned Spareen, "Remember our agreement. No foolishness."

After he left, Dimitry turned to Spareen and said: "Tell me a bit about your people. Vaylance tells me that you're not really Tartars, like the Kalmucks and Nogais."

"That's right," said Spareen. "We were here before the Mongols came. According to our tradition, we rode with Attila the Hun. Some of us settled in Hungary and The Balkans, but most of us stayed in Caucasia or on the steppe."

"You're descended from the Huns, then?" asked Dimitry. "The people who drank the blood of their enemies?"

"No, we are not Huns either. The Huns were probably accused of drinking blood because we rode with them. We are a separate race entirely. According to our tradition, we originally came from the Altai Mountain area, north of Mongolia."

"What did you mean about drinking blood? Did your people actually do that?"

Spareen was feeling a bit uncomfortable and wasn't sure how to answer this. Finally he said, "A long time ago, we were a race of physicians, and it was our custom to take, in payment for healing, small amounts of human blood. But it's just an old story."

"I should hope so!" said Dimitry.

Across the table Ivan began to pick out a lively dance tune on his instrument. "Let's get this party going!" he cried.

Soon people were on their feet, pushing back the tables. A line of dancers formed, weaving in and out around each other in a difficult pattern. Dimitry got up to dance. Spareen accepted another cup of wine and sat back in his chair, putting his feet up on another. He was beginning to feel the effects of the wine. It seemed to help the heaviness in his head; however too much would have the opposite effect, and he realized he'd better stop soon. But not just yet.

Dimitry came stomping back to the table and sat down, his blond bulk looking totally dejected. He kicked at one of the table legs.

"What's wrong, my friend?" asked Spareen.

"That stuck-up girl, Ustenka, won't dance with me, since an officer has taken an interest in her tail."

Spareen looked across the room to where the pretty Cossack girl flirted with one of the Russian officers.

"I can get her to come over here," he offered.

"I doubt it," said Dimitry. "But go ahead and try, if you think you can." He apparently expected Spareen to make some excuse to go up and speak to the girl. But Spareen just leaned back in his chair and half closed his eyes, carefully following her movements.

Ustenka looked up suddenly with a questioning glance, but then went back to talking to her officer. The officer caught her around the waist and pulled her down on his lap, but she jumped up from the table, blushing and giggling. She turned back to the table where the Russian officers sat laughing, and hesitated, looking again at Spareen. He nodded to her, indicating that she should come join his table. Slowly, with a puzzled stare, she approached.

"What's the matter, Ustenka?" one of the men at the officers' table called after her. She ignored him and came up beside Spareen.

"May I join your table?" she asked.

Dimitry moved closer to Spareen and made room for her to pull up a chair.

"How did you do that?" he asked Spareen.

Spareen was feeling reckless. The wine was beginning to go to his head. It felt good after that awful headache, but he would have to stop soon. Just one more cup.

"I can get any woman in this room," he drawled, "if she'll look me in the eye just once."

"What rubbish!" exclaimed Ivan, his

teeth flashing under a flaming mustache. "If you Tartar infidels are so handy with women, bring us a few more."

"All right, I will," declared Spareen. He waved to a dark-haired girl and caught her eye. She came and joined their table.

"Nothing to it," he said.

A stocky girl carrying a plate of cakes was the next to meet Spareen's entrapping gaze. She too came over and sat down. The Russian enlisted men at the table were making the most of their chance to engage the Cossack girls in conversation. Ivan, however, was so fascinated by Spareen's way with women that he all but ignored the pretty girl sitting next to him.

"Try that one," he would say, indicating another woman with a reputation for being unapproachable. Some of them took longer than others, but eventually each of them, after a few moments of his attention, would look around to see who was staring at her and meet his beckoning eyes. After a while many of the young men came over and joined Spareen's table, since that was where most of the women were.

Ivan had an idea and moved around the table to be closer to Spareen. He pressed his bristly copper beard near Spareen's ear and said, "I'll bet you can't get Maryanka, the captain's woman. She's more stubborn and strong-willed than the usual wench."

Spareen was thoroughly enjoying himself. "Will you wager your horse

against mine then?" he asked, for he secretly coveted one of the sleek Russian mounts.

"That's a fine wager for you," said Ivan, "but what would I do with that little nag you rode in on?"

"My horse may be smaller and not as fast as yours, but she's tougher. You can ride her all day and night, and feed her just the coarse grass of the steppe, and she thrives. Your big Kabarda horse would die of such treatment. Besides, my horse can do tricks. Come, I'll show you" Spareen got up and walked unsteadily toward the door. Ivan caught up with him, and together they staggered out of the house, down the steps to the street.

When they got to Rimsky's yard where the horses were penned, Spareen gave a whistle and the golden-eyes mare came trotting up to the fence. She tossed her dark mane in greeting and the moonlight picked up a glint of silver in it.

"Well, show me what she can do," said Ivan.

"How's this for a start," Spareen spoke to the mare in the old language, the horse language known only to his people. The mare backed off from the fence, then charged at it, arching up and over in a perfect leap.

"She's a lovely little thing, isn't she?" said Spareen.

"But she's barely a horse," said Ivan. "More like an oversize pony."

The mare came over and nuzzled Spareen's sleeve. He fondled her small,

wedge-shaped head, pulling her forelock and tickling her ears.

"Be careful, Spareen," she said by a twitch of her nose. "Vaylance wouldn't like this."

"If you tattle on me, I'll tie a knot in your tail," he whispered.

Aloud he said, "Now, show Ivan how you can lie down," and she obediently knelt down and rolled on her side.

"Now she'll play dead." Spareen walked over to a tree that grew in the yard and picked a branch. Returning, he flicked her ears. She didn't so much as flinch, but lay as if stone. He batted at her belly. Still no response. At a self-spoken word she scrambled to her feet again.

"All right," said Ivan, "It's a bet."

"Show me the woman," said Spareen, after he had put the mare back in the pen.

They walked back to the party a little more sober than when they had left it. When they re-entered the house, the people had redistributed so that their table was not the center of attention it had been. Ivan pointed out Maryanka, a small, fine-boned woman with long black hair and pale thin face, fine as a cameo. She was sitting directly across the room from them, but try as he might, Spareen could not get her to look his way.

"I told you so," said Ivan, when he perceived that Spareen was having difficulties.

"She's a strong one," marveled

Spareen. A prickle of excitement stirred the roots of his belly fur. "Yet I'll bet my brother Vaylance could get her." He secretly hoped Vaylance couldn't, but he didn't say this to Ivan.

"Vaylance the pious? Don't make me laugh!" said Ivan.

At that particular moment, Vaylance arrived back at the party. Spareen thought he looked very tired and careworn, as he sometimes did after a difficult healing.

"All right," said Ivan. "If Vaylance can get her to come over here, you keep your mare."

When Vaylance came up to the table, Ivan asked him about the health of the colonel, Barikoff.

"He's not doing well," said Vaylance. "But at least I've taken away some of the pain. Perhaps in a few hours we'll have some medicine for him." Vaylance pinched the bridge of Spareen's nose with fingers still hot from healing. If there had been pain, it would have been little eased.

Spareen urgently motioned his brother aside to talk to him. Vaylance, when he found out about the bet, was furious.

"You mean you've gone and wagered your sister, your horse on an outblood woman. What idiocy!" His black eyes flashed dangerously. "And I suppose you've been summoning people all night to show off, you camel's ass! You endanger my position here."

"All right, I was stupid to start it," said Spareen. "But now I've gotten into

it and I don't care if I lose my horse because that woman's wolf-minded. Try yourself and see if you can get her. Your better at it than me. But remember, I saw her first."

This information caused Vaylance to pull up short in his anger. He allowed his eyes to stray over to the table where the small, fine-boned woman was sitting.

"Maryanka, the captain's woman," he mused. "Could I have overlooked her before?" He sat down at the table slowly, as if in trance, propped his chin up with one hand and concentrated on the dark-haired woman.

"So! She's even too much for your brother," said Ivan after this had gone on for a while.

Spareen and Vaylance had all but forgotten about the bet.

"She looked me in the eye once, I'm sure of it," said Spareen.

"Well, I guess you'd better close in for a better look," said Vaylance.

"You go, I'd botch it for sure."

"You saw her first," said Vaylance. "You go, but remember, if she's wolf-minded, the choice is hers not ours."

Feeling very unsure of himself, Spareen got up and made his way over to the table where she was sitting, a little ways off from everyone else.

"Does the captain's woman drink alone?" he asked.

"I belong to no one," she replied. "I'm not a possession."

"I'm sorry," he faltered, "I didn't mean to imply that you were." She

wouldn't even look at him.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

"I wish you wouldn't," she said. Still her eyes looked away.

"Very well," he said, "but you could at least look at me when you speak. It's common courtesy." Now he was sure he had her.

But when she raised her eyes and appeared to look his way, he saw that her eyes were unfocused, so that she stared through him to a place behind his back on the wall.

"An old Tartar trick!" he exclaimed. "How did you know it?"

"I know what you are," she said. "I watched you bewitching people all evening with your wild Varkela eyes."

"How do you know of the Varkela then?" he asked, for his folk kept their secret from the Cossacks.

"My grandmother taught me," she said, and then she quoted for him the rhyme that Tartars who have dealings with the Varkela teach their children:

"To love Varkela, you must pay the cost.

Don't look him in the eye or you'll be lost."

"Are you Tartar then?" he asked.

"My grandmother was. She was captured in a raid by the Cossacks." Her eyes carefully regarded the surface of the table.

"If you know of the Varkela, then you know that we are rather persistent suitors. The more you resist, the harder we try."

Anticipation stirred in him. He

might lose his mare, but it would surely be worth it.

"You cannot be with someone over any long period of time and never look him in the eye," he said. "I am patient at the waiting game: You would surely lose eventually. Why not look at me now and get it over with."

She never raised her eye, and for a long time said nothing. when she finally spoke, she said:

"One thing I have heard of the Varkela is that they are an older race than we are, and have a kinship with all wild things. Some people call me the captain's woman, but it might more truly be said that he is my man, for I would rather be owner than owned. If you have any compassion for wild things, then have mercy on my untamed will. Do not command me to obey you."

He was touched by her plea and was momentarily ashamed that he had been luring people about as if he had no respect for the fact that they had wills of their own. He resolved not to compel her, but there was something he must know.

"If I promise not to summon you, will you let me look once into your eyes, that I might know what manner of creature you are?"

"What will you swear by?" she asked.

"By my father's blood," he began, regretting that he had to give an oath. "By the eight-trunked mother-tree that upholds the world, and by the gray-

ghost stag sacred to my people Varkela."

He waited hopefully, but she still did not raise her eyes.

"I fear to trust you, for you are demonkind."

"Some call us that, but we are not demons. We are a people like any other people."

"There are no people like the *Children of the Night*," she said, "but I suppose I must look, trust you or not, else you'll keep me here till cockcrow, and come back the next night, and the next, until I give in. As you said, you can out wait me."

She raised dark, amber eyes and allowed him to look on them, and he saw that indeed something wild dwelt there, but he was disappointed that that wild thing was not a wolf. She had a soul-beast unusual for an outblood woman, Ranni the little musk-deer that hides in the marshes. He saw that he could summon her if he chose. But such a brave little deer she was, sitting there throwing his Varkela witching stare back at him, that he could not help but respect her. He lowered his eyes and said:

"Go with grace, little sister."

The captain's woman stood up and glided determinedly toward the door.

In his throat, Spareen felt a constriction of sadness, as he often did after such encounters. We are an old race, he thought, and we are dying out.

"You've won," he said to Ivan,

when he got back to his table. He explained to Vaylance what had transpired and then, turning to the red-bearded Cossack, said, "It must be getting late for you. Hadn't we better go and collect your new horse?"

"One more before we go," said Ivan. "You must salve your loss, Spareen."

And Spareen, feeling the need of such comfort, having lost both the woman and his golden-eyes mare, drank a few more rounds for the sake of good fellowship and staggered drunkenly to the horse-pens to deliver his mare into Ivan's care. Before handing over the halter rope, he taught Ivan a few words to say to her, and then he whispered something in her ear. It was nearly dawn when Vaylance helped him stumble up the steps to Dr. Rimsky's cottage. They were just about to settle down to sleep when Spareen felt the familiar searing pain in his naso-dental sinuses.

"Vaylance, it's time," he said, holding his pounding temples in his hands.

"So soon?" Vaylance placed a cold finger between Spareen's eyes. Like a small, sucking mouth, the finger drew out most of the pain.

"It's time." Spareen could feel the bitter ichor of the mold leak in small golden drops from his hollow blood-teeth.

When they reached the sick room in the officers' quarters, Barikoff was twisting back on the bed in a sort of

delirium, his pale, waxy face smirking in a gargoyle grimace. Rimsky was restraining the ulcerated leg in his large pink hands.

"Fever's worse," he said. "And I don't like the looks of that wound."

Spareen saw that the ulcers oozed green effluent.

"It's as bad as that other one I treated," he said to Vaylance. "I doubt this will do much good. The green pus doesn't respond to the mold-cure."

"Nevertheless, we must try," said Vaylance. "It's the only hope he has."

They drained the abcess one last time before proceeding. Spareen noted the foul smell of the green putrescence, held his breath and bit deeply into the inflamed vein of Barikoff's leg, disgorging the product of his swollen sinuses drop by drop. After a quarter of an hour, he'd exhausted his supply and there was nothing to do but hope.

The golden sun was just brimming over the horizon as the two brothers made their way across the foot bridge to the infirmary.

Before settling down to sleep, Vaylance brought Spareen a tin box with a fresh portion of bread dough. Spareen expelled the dregs of his sinuses into the fresh dough, then settled himself for his daytime sleep. His last waking thoughts were of the greening wound and of his failure to save the Kalmuck prince Soodshi-Noyon from this same death. Then his thoughts turned toward his hunger and his longing to sink his fangs into the rich, red river of life. A

small musk-deer paused a moment on the border of a marsh, then vanished to safety among the high reeds.

Rimsky came early in the evening to wake them, saying, "Barikoff's fever has broken. His leg has ceased draining and begun to return to a normal color."

"Excellent," said Vaylance, sitting up. Spareen groaned and rolled over on his stomach. He felt Vaylance shaking him but ignored it. "Too much wine," he muttered, pulling the pillow down over his head. He couldn't believe he'd affected a cure to the green-pus sickness. It must be a dream.

"Also," Rimsky continued, "Dimitry sends his apologies for abandoning you last night, and he's left a fine bottle of vodka for Spareen, although he neglected to tell me what the occasion was."

Vaylance burst out laughing and slapped his prostrate brother on the back.

"At least someone's love life is going well," he said.

Spareen belched and rolled over. His mouth tasted like the insides of his old felt boots.

"What about my mare? Any word about her?"

"Oh, yes, Ivan says that fool mare dumped him three times, the third time in a gorse bush," said Rimsky.

"For shame, Spareen!" said Vaylance.

"For shame, nothing," said Spa-

reen. "He called you a smelly goat-doctor."

"Speaking of doctors," said Rimsky, "you may someday be one, Vaylance. Bari koff was quite impressed with your healer's touch and your brother's mold-cure. He's consented to provide a grant for your continuing study of medicine."

"How wonderful," said Vaylance, jumping up to pace about the room. "Then I'll be able to continue working at the fort here with you. And perhaps Spareen could assist me." He rubbed his small hands together, restless and excited.

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea, if things like last night's episode keep occurring," Rimsky said guardedly. "There's quite a rumor going around about your brother's ability to attract women. I'm warning you, lad, those Russian boys you wish to befriend would turn on you in an instant, if they found out your true nature."

"It won't happen again," said Vaylance. "Tonight, this idiot goes back to the steppe."

"That's a fine way to show your gratitude," said Spareen, sitting up holding his head, his stomach in a state of turmoil.

"Well, you can't stay here," said Vaylance. "You take too many risks. Some superstitious Cossack might drive a stake through your heart."

Vaylance regarded Spareen sternly, as if waiting for the impact of his words to sink in, then smiled. "On sec-

ond thought, maybe that's not such a bad idea. You'd make a good cadaver for my continuing study of medicine."

"I'll leave right now!" yelled Spareen. "You've convinced me." He hopped up from the bed and wobbled across the room, where he braced himself against a table to get his bearings.

"And did he really lure twenty women at once over to his table?" asked Rimsky, his bushy gray eyebrows arched quizzically.

"Is that your scientific curiosity showing?" asked Vaylance. "Because if not, you're just as bad a gossipmonger as the rest of them."

"Purely a matter of scientific inquiry," Rimsky snapped. But he winked at Vaylance before leaving the room.

"I'm not going to cure your headache from all that wine," said Vaylance, "because you deserve it for such overindulgence."

Spareen breathed deeply a few times and quickly dragged his ungainly self over to the sink where he retched miserably, then rinsed his mouth out.

"What I'm wondering," he said when he was at last able to get his breath, "is how is it that I was able to cure the green pus sickness by the mold-cure this time."

"I'm wondering the same thing," said Vaylance. He was staring into the tin box that held the bit of dough Spareen had brought in with him from the steppe. He took the other tin box with the dough Spareen had seeded from his

sinuses the night before and held it to the light for Spareen to see. The two cultures were different, one gray-green, the other rust-brown.

"Just as our ancestors separated from humankind and became a second race, so our mold has changed from one thing to another," said Vaylance. "It's a miracle of God."

"Or a miracle of nature," said Spareen, taking the two tin boxes and closing them carefully. Two mold cures! Now he would not have to despair when a wound turned greenish under his care. His feelings of exultation were short-lived, however, for as he packed the two tin boxes in his saddlebags, his thoughts strayed to the golden-eyes mare. She was under a Cossack saddle now and it was all his fault. Something had to be done.

Later that evening the golden-eyes mare saw Spareen coming toward her, dragging his saddle in one hand and rubbing his eye with the other.

"You've been fighting again," she observed.

"A little," he said, depositing the saddle on her back and tying up the cinch. He led her through the gates of the stanitza, mounted up, and turning his back on the long teeth of the Caucasus, set off for the steppe of home.

"You shouldn't be so quick-tempered," said the mare.

"I'm not quick-tempered," said Spareen. "When Ivan called me a jug-eared Tartar. I didn't hit him, and when he

spat on my boots, I let it pass."

"Very commendable," said the mare.

"And when he said that my mother was a two-kopek strumpet, I didn't start anything."

"I'm proud of you for that," said the mare. "But, tell me, if your behavior was so circumspect, how did you get that lovely black eye?"

"Well, I restrained myself through it all somehow, but, little sister, when he called you a rat-tailed hinny, I felt it was a point of honor, and hit him."

"Me, a rat-tailed hinny!" neighed the mare, her ears standing straight up like the tines of a hay fork. "In that case, he got exactly what he deserved!" She switched her tail and snorted.

With pleasure he recalled how his fist had connected with a resounding crunch to Ivan's red-bearded jaw. The fellow was probably still lying there, out cold, or perhaps feeling a little weak from the two pinprick marks on the arm where Spareen had sunk his hungry were-teeth to suck a cupful into his blood-starved vessels. Spareen's hunger still pained him, but he wasn't worried. He was a skilled healer, and the nomads of the steppe would come to pay the *blood-price*.

Above him the crescent moon sailed like a golden boat upon a sea of clouds, and the steppe spread to the horizon, an ocean of billowing grass.

"And not a wolf-minded one in the bunch," he said to nobody in particular.

1	J	2	R		3	L	4	P	5	K		6	A	7	R	8	L		9	E	10	L		
11	X	12	M	13	Q		14	Q	15	A		16	Z	17	D	18	H	19	Z	20	B	21	J	
22	P	23	D	24	O		25	+	26	G	27	J	28	L		29	O	30	S	31	C	32	R	
33	S		34	M	35	P	36	Y	37	K	38	M	39	+	40	B		41	A	42	I	43	A	
	44	B	45	S	46	E	47	D	48	R	49	F		50	S	51	O		52	N	53	A		
	54	*	55	M	56	C	57	D	58	Q		59	A	60	+		61	B		62	S			
63	S	64	Y	65	L	66	F	67	I	68	B		69	A		70	Q	71	V	72	F	73	W	
	74	P	75	U		76	D	77	Q	78	G		79	O	80	D	81	N		82	U			
83	F	84	A	85	*		86	I	87	T	88	*	89	N	90	C	91	C		92	P	93	J	
94	Q	95	*	96	*	97	R	98	F		99	F	100	*		101	C		102	X	103	S		
104	C	105	D	106	A	107	E		108	K	109	A		110	D	111	K	112	L	113	R	114	X	
115	B	116	C		117	C	118	+	119	D	120	L	121	S	122	E	123	P	124	S		125	B	
126	I	127	J	128	L	129	P	130	Z		131	R	132	K	133	W		134	H	135	S	136	G	
	137	X	138	D	139	S	140	O		141	Q	142	Y		143	Q	144	J		145	S			
146	C	147	X	148	V	149	I	150	Z	151	W	152	H	153	T		154	B	155	L	156	W		
157	S	158	Y	159	R	160	I		161	N	162	Q	163	L		164	*	165	P	166	Y			
167	V	168	E	169	T	170	R	171	D		172	V	173	W	174	S	175	V	176	*	177	Z		
178	M	179	P		180	Z	181	N	182	H		183	P	184	P	185	X		186	S	187	C		
188	E	189	M	190	Q	191	M		192	T	193	O	194	T	195	D	196	M	197	C	198	A	199	L
	200	F	201	K	202	I	203	Z	204	E	205	M	206	Q	207	Q	208	T						

Acrostic Puzzle

by Rachel Cosgrove Payes

This puzzle contains a quotation from a science fiction story. First, guess the clues and write the word in the numbered blanks beside the clues. Put these letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of the line is not necessarily the end of a word. Words end with black squares.) If your clue words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. If you can guess some of these words, put the letters into the blanks for the clues, over the appropriate numbers. This will help to guess more words. The first letters of the correctly worked clues spell the name of the author and the title of the sf work from which the quotation is taken.

A. Wife of 'T', first name.

6 41 84 15 198 109

B. "The Trouble with ____"

125 115 61 44 68 40 20 154

C. The Good Doctor
(two words).

56 117 101 31 91 187 116 197 104 90

146

D. SF's Great Dane (two words).

195 80 138 57 110 23 171 105 47 76

119 17

E. Chalker's "Dance Band on
the _____".

107 168 204 46 188 122 9

F. _____ FOR ASTOUNDING,
Rogers.

49 83 200 66 99 98 72

G. Female sheep.

78 136 26

H. SF artist.

152 182 18 134

I. Runners.

149 126 86 42 202 67 160

J. Moistens again.

21 27 127 93 1 144

K. Crowfoot to suspend awning
(naut.)

201 111 108 5 37 132

L. One function of Venus
probes.

28 155 10 65 120 199 163 128 112 3

M. Author of NIGHT'S MASTER, (two words).	189	178	38	205	34	55	196	12	191
N. Former sf concept of weather on Venus.	161	81	52	181	89				
O. Image.	140	29	51	193	24	79			
P. Tanith Lee story (2 words)	92	22	123	74	184	129	165	183	35 179
	4								
Q. Tiptree's <i>alter ego</i> (two words)	14	94	143	70	77	13	141	162	190 58
	206	207							
R. What can you do with the bands of Orion? (2 words)	170	7	2	32	113	159	131	48	97
S. Anagram.	30	103	124	145	139	174	63	121	33
T. Award winning sf writer, first name.	208	194	87	153	169	192			
U. Hypothetical force.	75	82							
V. Famous sf artist.	167	148	175	71	172				
W. Tivonell's world.	173	151	133	73	156				
X. Lucifer smashes earth with this	137	114	11	102	147	185			
Y. Levels.	158	36	142	166	64				
Z. SF writer from Down Under.	19	150	130	180	16	177	203		
+ Was indebted for.	60	118	39	25					
*. Sheldon pseudonym, first name.	85	88	54	95	164	96	100	176	
\$\$. Wove.	157	135	50	186	45	62			
0. _____ OF THE LIGHT, Martin.	59	53	69	106	43				

Answer will appear in the May issue.

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